HRILLING

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SCIENCE FICTION

ATEWAY TO GLORY
FREDRIC BROWN

K ME NO QUESTIONS
MACK REYNOLDS

THE SCREAMING SHAPES
by FRANKLIN GREGORY

NE LEG IS ENOUGH by KRIS NEVILLE

MORE POTENT WEAPON by ROG PHILLIPS

HE LUNAR POINT OF VIEW by S. M. TENNESHAW

THE SQUARES FROM SPACE
by P. F. COSTELLO

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HEPCATS OF VENUS

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EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION

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Glory

Crag managed to steal a fortune—only to find that what it would buy was too rotten even for a crook. . . .

THERE was this Crag, and he was a criminal and a killer and just about the toughest guy in the solar system. But it wasn't doing him much good right then because he was dying.

He was dying on a world no bigger than an orange. It had been an asteroid a little bigger than a house when he'd landed on it—with Jon Olliver and Evadne—less than an hour before.

And when he, Crag, had learned about Olliver's plans, he'd made a

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damn fool hero of himself; he'd shoved the spaceship off into space so none of them could get away again, ever. Then he'd managed to kill Olliver before Olliver had killed him and the atoms that had made up Olliver's body were now one with the collapsed atoms of the asteroid that was now too small a world to live on, but not to die on.

Already the oxygen tank of his space suit was almost empty; he was breathing hard and painfully. Too bad, he thought, that he'd had to destroy the disintegrator instead of using it on himself to shorten the final agony—as Evadne, beautiful Evadne—had been able to do when the air in her space suit had run out.

And Crag was dying now; he'd be dead in ten minutes or maybe five. And it was funny; he wanted to laugh because he had two hundred thousand credits, a fortune, in his pocket. And ten minutes ago, for the first time, he'd had the most beautiful woman he'd ever known in his arms and she had loved him. But you can't spend a fortune on an asteroid, especially one that's been collapsed into neutronium, and you can't get much satisfaction out of loving a woman in a space suit in the void..

Crag laughed. This was a piece with everything that had happened to him since the day, years ago, that he'd lost his rating as a spaceman when he'd lost his left hand cleaning a tube that had accidentally fired. He had been cheated out of his compensation, on a technicality, by the corrupt officialdom of the spaceways. He'd turned criminal then, and had been as ruthless to society as it had been to him. And this wasn't bad, compared to some of the ways he'd almost died, or worse than died, a dozen times before. Dying from lack of oxygen isn't exactly painless, but he'd endured worse pain, and stoically, and in situations that lacked the anodyne of humor, however bitter humor, that this one had.

A world in his pocket! When the disintegrated asteroid had collapsed into a solid little ball of neutronium, that unbelievably heavy stuff from which some of the stars are made, he'd put it in his pocket. Of course, actually, because of their relative mass, he'd moved his own body in relation to it rather than the other way around, but that was a detail. He took it out of his pocket now and looked at it in the dim light of the distant sun. There on the surface of it were the collapsed atoms that had been Evadne, Evadne of the lushly beautiful body and the hair like burnished copper, the eyes that were a deeper blue than space seen through an atmosphere. No one could recognize her now.

He thought how wonderful it would have been if Evadne had lived and if he were going to live. Or would it? There would have been no place for them, anywhere in the system. Crag sighed and it was such a strange sound that he realized it was the first time he'd done so for years. He was getting soft. Well, it didn't matter now. And it had been a rasping sigh because his body was fighting for breath.

He wished that he had enough control over his body to tell it to stop fighting, but no man, not even one as tough as Crag, can force his lung muscles to quit a struggle for breath.

Suddenly a voice inside his mind said, "What is wrong?" Not the words, but the thought.

IT STARTLED him because he was alone, more alone than he'd ever been before. It was like the way the telepathic semi-savages of Venus spoke to one, yet clearer, even more sharp than that, more nearly like an

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actual voice. One you could almost hear.

He looked around him and there was nothing but the void, distant Sol, the stars, and closer but still many miles away, the pinpoint reflections of the asteroids. And out there somewhere, although he couldn't spot it at the moment, was the spaceship he'd pushed away from the asteroid. But nowhere life. Who or what had spoken inside his mind?

He concentrated on the thought: *Who are you?*

"I do not know. I thought to discover the answer from you, but I do not find it in your mind. I find many confused things, but not that. I find pain and the thought that you are going to cease to exist. Why? What is wrong?"

"Oxygen," Crag thought. "I am dying from lack of oxygen."

"Do not think of the word," came the thought in his mind. "Think of the thing itself. I perceive now from your mind that it is a gas, that it is an element. Think of its structure."

Crag was not a physicist, but the atomic structure of oxygen is a comparatively simple one. He thought of it, pictured it.

And suddenly he wasn't fighting for breath any longer; he was breathing normally.

"That is better," came the alien thought. "Now will you think thoughts that will tell me who and what you are, why you are here and what has happened? From that, I can possibly determine who and what *I* am, how I came to be. I think it will be best if you tell it as though you were talking, but try to think, too, of the meanings of the words as you use them."

Crag said, "All right. I am Crag. A man named Olliver hired me to steal a device from a scientist, one that—I realize now—the scientist had suppressed because it was too dangerous to use; it could have destroyed entire planets. It was a disintegrator; it collapsed atoms into neutronium, setting up a chain reaction in any reasonably homogeneous substance, so that, although tiny, it could have destroyed Earth or Mars or Venus.

"I gave it to Olliver. Three of us —Olliver, his wife Evadne, and I— came here in Olliver's spaceship to try out the device. We landed on an asteroid and used the disintegrator on it; it collapsed, gradually, into a tiny ball of almost infinitely heavy matter, hundreds of tons to the square inch.

"While it was doing so, Olliver told us his plans and we learned that he had lied about them. He intended taking over rule of the solar system through his threat to destroy any planet that opposed him. He would have had to destroy at least one planet to rule the others.

"I learned then that Evadne was against him. She had hated him but had stayed with him because she suspected what his plans were and hoped to stop them. In the showdown, I sided with Evadne."

"Why?" came the thought.

Crag grinned. "I guess I'm not as much of a crook as Olliver was. I've killed plenty of people, but they all needed killing. It's a pretty corrupt place, right now, the solar system. I wouldn't have minded Olliver ruling it; he couldn't have been any worse than those who run it now. But I found out I didn't hate it enough to let a planet or two—and several billion people—be destroyed in order to put him into power. And maybe, too, because I found out that I—" he hesitated at the thought "—loved Evadne."

"Anyway, Olliver tried to kill us and I killed him. Evadne's oxygen ran out first and she used the disintegra-

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tor on herself rather than die more slowly. I would have, too, but I had to destroy the disintegrator so it would never be found. That is all until you asked in my mind, 'What is wrong?' All right, now what's this business about you not knowing who you are? How *can* you not know who you are or even what you are?"

"I am beginning to understand," said the thought in Crag's mind. "Will you concentrate on all you know of—matter, energy and thought?"

IT WASN'T a lot, and didn't take long. Crag knew only the general outlines of current theories. He knew more about rocket motors, space-warp, and picking locks.

The thought in his mind said, "I understand, now. I am a new entity, a new consciousness created in the collapse of the atoms of the asteroid upon which the disintegrator was used. Even as matter can be converted to energy through fission, so matter can be converted to consciousness through disintegration."

Crag thought. It seemed possible. He'd wondered what had happened to the energy that had kept the atoms and molecules apart, once they had collapsed into that tiny, incredibly heavy ball he held in his hand. Matter into energy; energy into consciousness. Why not? And why not the third step: could consciousness create matter?

He'd been thinking, but he might as well have spoken aloud. The voice in his mind answered him. "I do not know. Perhaps, a strong enough consciousness. Not mine, any more than yours. No, I did not create oxygen in the tank of your suit. I—think of the word, please. Yes, I transmuted matter that was already there into the form of matter on which you concentrated. I can change the form of matter, I can cause it to move; I cannot create it. Now, what shall I do for you?"

Crag laughed. An asteroid—yes, he supposed that the ball of collapsed matter in his hand was still an asteroid regardless of its form—was asking him what it could do for him.

"There is a spaceship nearby," he said. "Can you bring it back, or take me to it? It's the ship we came in. I shoved it and the asteroid—you—apart to prevent Olliver from getting away in it."

"Yes, I perceive it. I can move it from here. I am doing so. It is coming toward us."

Crag looked around and saw it: a gray spot in Orion, growing slowly larger. He laughed again; he was going to spend that two hundred thousand dollars after all! Incredibly, he was going to live and to return to civilization, such as it was.

The asteroid caught the thought in his mind. It said, "Think about your civilization, Crag. Concentrate on it, that I may learn about it. It seems a strange, corrupt thing. I do not like it."

Sudden fear hit Crag. He had stopped Olliver's plans to take over and rule the solar system by destroying one or more planets of it. But had something even more dangerous happened? Would—

"No," said the asteroid. "Do not fear that, Crag. I would neither destroy nor rule your race or any other. I am not a monster. I am neither good nor evil. I think that I know what I am going to do, to become. But it will not affect the race to which you belong."

Crag relaxed his mind. Somehow, he knew that that was true.

He thought, "Anyway, do not judge the human race by my opinion of it. I am a criminal, every hand against me and my hand against every man—especially the metal hand that is my

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best weapon. Men have treated me badly; I have repaid them in kind. But do not judge them by what I think of them. Perhaps I am more warped than they."

"I do not think so. Please concentrate on how the system is governed."

CRAG let his mind think about the two parties—both equally crooked and corrupt—that ran the planets between them, mostly by cynical horse trading methods that betrayed the common people on both sides. The Guilds and the Syndicates—popularly known as the Guilds and the Gildeds—one purporting to represent capital and the other purporting to represent labor, but actually betraying it at every opportunity. Both parties getting together to rig elections so they might win alternately and preserve an outward appearance of a balance of power and a democratic government. Justice, if any, obtainable only by bribery. Objectors or would-be reformers—and there weren't many of either—eliminated by the hired thugs and assassins both parties used. Strict censorship of newspapers, radio and television, extending even to novels lest a writer attempt to slip in a phrase that might imply that the government under which he lived was less than perfect.

Crag thought of instance after instance until the voice in his mind said, "Enough. Your spaceship is here."

He looked around and saw it, the handle of the door was within reach. He opened it and climbed in, the sphere of neutronium that had been an asteroid and was now a sentient being floated gently beside him, obviously managing in some way to neutralize its own mass in relation to that of the spaceship.

Crag turned on the airmaker. The spaceship was too small to have an airlock; on ships of such size it is more economical to let the air escape when leaving and build up an atmosphere again after return and before removing space suits. He watched the gauge, and while he was waiting for the air pressure to build up, he asked, "What now? What do you wish me to do?"

"You are very tired; you have not slept for several days. I suggest that you sleep."

"And you?"

"I intend to visit the planets to see at first hand what you have told me. I shall return by the time you awaken."

"You mean you can—" Crag started to question, and then stopped. After the powers he had seen the newborn entity exhibit already, he didn't doubt that it could do anything it said it could, even to an investigation of all of the planets and a return within a few hours.

Then it occurred to him that if the sphere was going to leave the ship, he was wasting time building up air pressure; might as well get the opening and closing of the lock over with first. He turned, but the sphere didn't seem to be anywhere around. He thought, "Where are you?"

The answering thought inside his brain was very faint. "Three hundred thousand miles toward Mars. Await my return, Crag."

CHAPTER II

THREE hundred thousand miles, Crag thought, and the sphere couldn't have been gone more than seconds; it must be able to move itself at almost the speed of light! Not by teleportation, either; that would have been instantaneous.

He turned back to the gauge and saw that the air pressure was sufficient; he took off his spacesuit and made sure that the two hundred

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thousand credits were still safe in his pocket. Then he sighed with weariness and lay down on one of the twin bunks on either side of the ship.

He was too tired to go directly to sleep, too stunned by all that had happened to wonder much at it. He knew that after he'd slept he'd doubt it all and find the existence of the sphere of neutronium as a living entity incredible. Now he accepted it calmly. He even missed it; it had been companionship out here in the void. Although as a criminal Crag always played a lone hand, he didn't like to be alone at other times, especially out here in the void, probably a million miles from the nearest other human. Not even that near unless the other human or humans were on a spaceship curving around the asteroid belt on a run between one of the inner planets and one of the three habitable moons of Jupiter, the only inhabited bodies outside of the inner planets.

He tried to keep from thinking of Evadne, of how beautiful she was the first time he had seen her, even in the severe costume of a technician, and how impossibly like a flame she had been when he had seen her next, dressed in an evening gown which was little more than a wisp of material above the waist and fitting her hips and thighs like a sheath. He tried not to think of the blue of her eyes or the soft copper of her hair, the creamy smoothness of her skin. And so, of course, he thought of all these things.

He tried not to think of the one time she had kissed him, and his lips burned and then felt cold.

And above all, he tried not to remember that, only hours ago, they had been in one another's arms—in space suits in the void. If only her suit had contained its full supply of oxygen so she could have lived a little longer, as long as he had, until the awakening intelligence of the newborn entity that had been an asteroid had made mental contact and learned enough of thought and of itself to ask that question, "What is wrong?" that had changed everything.

If only— But why think of futile ifs, now that Evadne was dead? So, of course, he thought of them.

When he got back to Earth—no, to Mars; it was nearer—he'd get himself drunk on some of the most expensive and fancy liquors of the solar system. Then maybe he could quit thinking about her. And you can stay drunk a long time on two hundred thousand credits. You could stay drunk a thousand years on that much money, if you could live that long.

But you can't live at all if you can't sleep, so after a while Crag got up and hunted through the medical compartment until he found some sleeping powders. He took two of them in spite of the "Danger. Take only one," warning on the box.

And after a while he slept.

HE AWOKE finally with a dull, lost feeling that he'd seldom had before except in jail. The small narrow bunk, the close confines of the ship to which he opened his eyes seemed like a cell to him. He reached into his pocket to be sure the money was still there and it was.

He wanted a drink worse then he'd ever wanted one in his life. What was he doing on a spaceship drifting idly out here in the void? Why hadn't he taken it into Marsport before he'd slept? Then he could have slept comfortably, luxuriously, in the best suite of the best Marsport hotel with a bottle to help him to sleep and to reach for when he awakened.

He swung his feet off the bunk and sat up. There, floating in the middle of the cabin, was the sentient sphere

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that had been an asteroid.

"You were right, Crag," spoke the voice in his mind.

Crag wondered what he'd been right about.

"About the corruptness of the race to which you belong. It is even worse than you thought of it as being. I have been inside many minds. They are weak minds, almost without exception morally weak."

Crag grinned. He thought, "I'm no lily myself."

"You are not, but you are strong. You are a criminal because you are a rebel against a society that has no place for strong men. In a society that is good, the weak are criminals; in a society that is bad, there is no place for a strong man except as a criminal. You are better than they, Crag. You have killed men, but you have killed them fairly. Your society kills them corruptly, by inches. Worse, those who are being killed acquiesce, not only because they are weak, but because they, too, hope to get on the exploiting side."

"You make the human race sound pretty bad."

"It *is* bad. This is a period of decadence. It has been better and it will be better again. I have studied your history and find that there were similar periods before and humanity has struggled out of them. It will again, Crag."

Crag yawned. He said, "You turned carbon dioxide to oxygen in my spacesuit. You wouldn't, by any chance, care to turn the water in that cooler into something stronger, would you? I could use a drink."

He felt in his mind a sense of amusement that was not his own, as though the entity that spoke there was laughing. The thought in his mind said, "Buy yourself your own drinks, Crag. You can afford them, and you can wait till you get to Marsport. I have something more important to do than to be a bartender for you."

"Such as?" Crag asked.

"To create a world."

Crag sat up straight and quit feeling sleepy. He said, "*What*?" aloud.

"Or possibly re-create one. There seems to be a difference of opinion among your astronomers as to whether the asteroids once formed a planet which broke up into many small pieces—of which I was one—or whether the gasses which, in the case of other planets, solidified into spheres, in the case of the asteroids formed a ring of gasses instead and solidified into many small bodies, planetoids.

"In either case, the matter for another planet is there, revolving around the sun in orbits between the orbit of Mars and the orbit of Jupiter. It is merely necessary to gather and coalesce them and there will be a new planet—or a scattered one will be re-created."

CRAG STARTED to ask why and then, instead, began to wonder why not. Neither question was answered.

Instead, the voice in his mind went on, quite calmly. "It is merely necessary for me to gather the other asteroids about myself as a nucleus. When all have been gathered, the planet will be larger than Mars, perhaps almost as large as Earth.

"It will be a new planet, a raw planet. It will need tough colonists, Crag. I want you to gather a few—criminals like yourself, who do not acquiesce in the social system of the rest of your race. Ones who are tough, not soft and weak like the others. Colonize and people me, Crag, with strong men like yourself."

Crag stared at the sphere. He asked softly, "Is that an *order*?"

"Of course not. It is a request. I

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can see into your mind enough to realize that you would die rather than obey an order—even if it was an order to do something you *wanted* to do. And that is why I want you, and men like you, to colonize the planet I shall create. Men who will not take orders." There was a pause and then the voice in Crag's mind said, "*I do not want to be a god,* Crag. I would not be colonized by anyone who *would* obey me. And yet I want people to live upon me."

Crag said, "You won't lack for people. If a new planet forms in the solar system—"

"No one will colonize me if I do not wish them to live there. I shall have a poisonous atmosphere, Crag. Poisonous to anyone I do not want. Crag, can you find other men who are, mentally and physically, as hard and as strong as you?"

"Perhaps, but—"

"I see your hesitation. On Earth or Mars you will be rich, with the two hundred thousand credits you have. They would be worthless on a new planet. You are right, but I think and hope you will soon tire of whatever that money will bring you. You are too strong to like a soft life. I think you will come to me. And when you do, bring others if you can—but they must be strong, too."

Crag said slowly, "I'll see. I'll think it over."

"Good. That is all I ask. Goodbye, Crag."

"Goodbye," Crag thought. Belatedly he remembered that the sphere had saved his life ten hours before when he had been dying in the void. The sphere was no longer there, but he thought "—and thanks," anyway, hoping that, even at the incredible speed at which it could travel, it would still catch the thought.

He stood up and stretched to get the stiffness of his long sleep out of his muscles. Then he picked the lock on the controls and set course for Mars. Not for Marsport, of course, or any other city. The spaceship was registered in Olliver's name, and if he landed it in any spaceport, he'd have to explain what had happened to Olliver, and that wouldn't be easy. And even if he himself got through the hands of the spaceport guards and the police, the two hundred thousand credits definitely would not.

He put the ship down in the Martian desert, carefully choosing a spot where red sand dunes screened it from sight and it could be seen only from above. A patrol craft would probably spot it sooner or later, but it *might* still be there if he ever wanted or needed it. Long experience had taught him that it was good to have a possible ace in the hole, even with a fortune in his pocket.

IT WAS early morning when he landed and he left the ship at once so he could reach civilization before the extreme heat of midday. Aside from the money, he carried nothing with him except a compass and a small paragun in case he should encounter any of the monster lizards of the Martian desert.

He met none, however, and reached the settlement of New Boston before the sun was halfway to the zenith. He chartered a plane there and was in Marsport before noon.

He spent a hundred credits for a fine wardrobe and luggage to contain it, then took an aircab to the Luxor, finest and most expensive hotel in a city whose major industry was catering to wealthy visitors from Earth.

The desk clerk stared disdainfully at Crag through pince-nez glasses. His gaze went to the four porters who were carrying Crag's new and expensive luggage. But so little of it!

His voice was cold and distant.

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"You have a reservation, of course, Mr.—ah."

"That's right," Crag said. "Mr. Ah. George Ah, to be exact. And I have no reservation, but I want the finest suite you have available."

"I am afraid, Mr.—ah—Ah, that there is nothing available."

Crag grinned. "If you'll take in my card to the manager, I'm sure he'll be able to arrange something."

He put down a ten-credit bill—at least a week's pay for the desk clerk, even of as swanky a hotel as the Luxor—on the desk.

The clerk's eyes warmed somewhat behind the pince-nez; they became no colder than hailstones and somewhat more protuberant. He said, "Pardon me, sir. I'll check the register." He didn't touch the ten-credit bill, but he pulled a crocodile-bound ledger from under the desk and covered the bill with it while he thumbed through pages. After a moment, he said, "The Gubernatorial Suite is open, sir. Twenty credits a day."

"I'll take it," Crag said. He signed "George Ah" on the register.

In the twenty-by-twenty living room of the suite, he tipped the four porters generously and then, as they left, looked about him. Doors indicated that he must have several other rooms at his disposal, but he walked out first onto the balcony and stood looking over the fabulous city of Marsport that lay below him in the bright, hot afternoon sun.

He felt strange here; he wondered for the first time what he, Crag, was doing here. It was the first time in his life that he had ever registered in a luxury hotel. It was plenty expensive—twenty credits a day was a month's wages on an average skilled job—but he had plenty of money and he should be safer here than in any inexpensive lodging. In Marsport, the more money you spent the less likely you were to be asked questions. If you spent money like water they figured you were a capitalist, a politician or a labor leader.

AFTER A few minutes he went back inside, closing the balcony door on the afternoon heat, and wondered what he should do. He was going to get drunk, of course, but why rush it? Plenty of time for that. The rest of his life, in fact.

He tried opening doors. The first led to a well-stocked liquor cabinet. He poured himself one drink of Martian woji, hoping it would make him feel a bit more cheerful, but it didn't. He tried the next door and it led to a library that was well stocked with books, records and tapes. He wandered about it briefly, noting that most of the books were pornographic; that meant that the tapes were probably pornographic also.

A double door in front of a pneumatic divan turned out to open on a television screen eight feet wide and six feet high. Crag turned on the switch and sat down on the divan. It was a musical show originating in New York on Earth. Before a three-dimensional chorus undulating in full color a pale tenor was singing:

Jet up! Jet down! On a slow ship to Pluto!
Honey-wunny-bunny, how'd you like my....

Crag got up and turned off the switch. He went back and had himself another drink at the liquor cabinet. It didn't taste particularly good to him.

He tried another door. It led to a smaller sitting room, well supplied with gambling equipment of all kinds, the walls lined with solitaire gambling machines. Crag knew that all the machines would be rigged with high percentages against him and didn't bother trying them. Besides, what's the

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fun in gambling when you've already got more money than you know what to do with?

Another door led to the master bedroom. It was even larger than the living room and more ornately furnished. The ebony bed was at least eight feet wide and was ornately furnished, indeed; a blonde, a brunette and a redhead, all naked, lay upon it. For just a second, Crag thought that the redhead looked like Evadne. But she didn't.

She was the one, though, that caught his eye. She sat up and raised her arms above her head, stretching like a kitten as she smiled at him. "Hello," she said.

Crag leaned against the jamb of the door. He asked, "Are you standard equipment? Pardon my ignorance, but I've never had a gubernatorial suite before."

The redhead laughed. "Of course. But you needn't keep *all* of us. Unless you wish." She looked demurely at her gilded toenails. The blonde smiled at him and then rolled over on her back, apparently figuring that she showed off to better advantages that way. She did. The brunette gave him a gamin grin. "We're more fun three at a time," she said. "We know tricks."

Crag said, "Get out. All of you."

They didn't argue; they didn't even seem offended or even annoyed. They got up calmly and went past him through the doorway of the bedroom and on out through the outer door into the hallway, still stark naked but apparently completely unaware of the fact.

Crag went over and made sure that the door was locked behind them. Then he went to the liquor closet and poured himself another drink. He noticed, for the first time, the pornographic murals above the bar of the liquor closet. He took the bottle of woji with him, and the glass. He slammed the door of the closet.

He drank that drink slowly, thinking and trying not to think.

There was a soft knock on the door. Crag put down his glass and went to answer it. A bellboy stood there just outside the door, smiling at him. A very beautiful young man, rosy and handsome, with soft ringlets of curly hair.

He said, "The management sent me, sir. Since you did not want— Is there anything I can do for you?"

Crag grinned and pretended to look him over carefully. He said, "Turn around."

The young man smiled knowingly and turned gracefully around. He had a pleasingly plump posterior; he wriggled it a trifle, provocatively.

Crag drew back his foot and kicked hard.

He closed the door gently.

CHAPTER III

HE WANDERED about the suite, wondering idly if there wasn't a cabinet of narcotics anywhere; it was equipped for everything else. But the management would probably send up any kind of dope you wanted if you phoned for it.

He found the dials of a newsradio in the wall and turned it on. Just before the end of a broadcast. "...in the asteroid belt," said the radio. "Scientists of both Mars and Earth are working on the problem, but have failed thus far to advance an acceptable theory to account for the unprecedented and incredible phenomenon. This concludes the newscast that started at three o'clock; the next newscast will be presented at four, Marsport time."

Crag glanced at his wristchrono and saw that there would be three-quar-

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ters of an hour to wait. He went to the phone and asked for the manager. An obsequious voice told him to wait a moment and a moment later a smooth voice said, "Carleton, manager, speaking."

"Gebrge Ah, suite two hundred," Crag said. "I just tuned in on the tail end of a newscast—Marsport news station—concerning something happening in the asteroid belt. Could you arrange with the station to have that part of the newscast played back for me immediately from the recording that was made of it at the time?"

"I fear, Mr. Ah, that would involve rewiring of the newscast set in your room. It is automatically tuned to the main carrier wave of—"

"Over the phone," Crag said. "Just put a call through to the station and have them play back that part of the newscast over the phone for me."

"I'll see if that can be arranged, Mr. Ah. If you'll please cradle your phone, I'll call you back as soon as..."

Crag cradled the phone and sat down beside it until the buzzer buzzed. He picked it up again.

"It can be arranged," said the manager's voice. "There will be a charge of ten credits. Is that satisfactory?"

"Arrange it," Crag said. "Hurry."

As he put the phone down again and watched it, he wondered what the hurry was. What went on out in the asteroid belt didn't concern him. *He* wasn't going to be sap enough to give up the soft life he could have here for anything as ridiculous as starting a colony of criminals on a new and raw planet.

But just the same he watched the phone, his impatience mounting until it buzzed again.

"The station is ready, sir. The management of the Luxor is glad to have been able to arrange..."

"Get off the wire, then," Crag said.

THERE WAS a short wait and then came the voice of the announcer of the newscast: "According to many reliable reports, a strange and incredible phenomenon is taking place in the asteroid belt. First report came in eight hours ago from Marsport astronomers who were observing the asteroid Ceres—largest of the asteroids, with a diameter of four hundred and eighty miles—when it vanished from the telescope, which had been set to follow its course automatically. When found again, it had changed speed greatly and direction slightly. The directional change was quickly analyzed by the computing machine and it was found that Ceres had now lost the eccentric and parabolic aspects of its orbit; it was following a perfectly circular orbit about the sun, perfectly in the plane of the ecliptic.

"When Ceres was found to be steady in its new orbit, observation was made of other of the asteroids—those large enough to be observable. Hidalgo, whose eccentricity is point six five, was found with difficulty, considerably out of its former orbit; its new orbit, upon analysis, also proved to be a perfect circle in the plane of the ecliptic, an orbit coinciding with that of Ceres—and Hidalgo is traveling at a far greater speed. Hidalgo will overtake and crash into Ceres within hours.

"The most amazing thing is that the speed of the asteroid Hidalgo in its new orbit and in relation to its mass is impossible according to the laws of angular momentum. Marsport Observatory immediately communicated with the other observatories of Mars and of Earth and for six hours now all telescopes in the system have been trained on the asteroids.

"No single asteroid large enough to be observable in a telescope is in its former orbit! All are now in, or moving toward, the same identical or-

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bit—a perfect circle which lies exactly halfway between the mean distance of Mars and the mean distance of Jupiter from the sun. And as they are moving at different speeds, they will all crash together *and form a new planet.*

"If it can be assumed that the smaller asteroids—those which cannot be seen telescopically—are joining in this movement then the new planet being formed will be slightly larger than Mars.

"Spaceships are now converging upon the asteroid belt to watch the incredible development at close hand. An event of cosmic importance is taking place in the asteroid belt. Scientists of both Earth and Mars are working on the problem, but have failed thus far to advance an acceptable theory to account for . . ."

Crag put the phone back in its cradle; that was where he'd tuned in on the newscast a few minutes before.

He thought, *So the little devil is really doing it.* He grinned and poured himself a drink from the woji bottle.

The grin faded slowly as he drank.

The shadows lengthened and vanished and it grew dark, and after a while he went out on the balcony and stood staring up at the moon Phobos hurtling across the Martian sky and after a while longer Demos, too, rose.

He wondered why he couldn't get drunk and why, with so much money, he wasn't happy.

He stared upward and located the plane of the ecliptic—the plane in which the planets revolve and which, to an observer on any planet is an imaginary line. He followed it through the familiar constellations, brighter through the thinner air of Mars than they are from Earth, until he found an unfamiliar dot in the constellation Virgo. He watched it for half an hour until he was sure that it was moving in relation to the stars around it. No other planet was then in Virgo; it must be the new one.

But he wasn't going there. Nothing would be crazier than to give up his sudden wealth for the rough life of a new planet.

HE WENT back inside the suite and turned on the radio. The announcer was talking about the elections on Earth, pretending that there was a doubt of their outcome, that they hadn't been decided and bargained for in advance between the two parties that were really one.

Crag listened without hearing until the announcer's voice changed to real interest. "Now for the latest reports on the new planet which is forming with incredible rapidity. Observations are being made from spaceships only a few thousand miles away. The new planet is now approximately the size of Mercury.

"It is revolving apparently at random so that each new asteroid to strike it and become part of it hits a different spot and a sphere is being formed. The asteroids, large and small, which are not already a part of it are moving toward it—some with retrograde motion—at many times their former speeds. It is estimated that the last of them will reach the new planet, completing it, within twelve hours or even less. As soon thereafter as the surface has stabilized, landings will be made.

"No decision has been made yet on a name for the new planet. Majority opinion favors giving the honor of naming it to Dr. Henry Wilkins of Marsport Observatory. It was Dr. Wilkins who first observed the perturbation of the orbit of the asteroid Ceres. His report focused attention upon the asteroid belt and led to the discovery that the new planet was being formed."

The newscaster went back to Ter-

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restrial politics and Crag shut off the radio. He thumbed his nose at it and went to the liquor closet for another bottle of woji.

He got drunk. And, as is the way with woji, he sat there, dull physically, but with his mind seeming more clear and brilliant than it had ever seemed before. He remembered everything that had ever happened to him and none of it seemed quite as bad as it had at the time. Not even the time he'd been tortured on Venus; thinking back about it, he had to laugh at the ridiculous seriousness with which the semi-savage Venusians took themselves and everything else. Why be serious? Everything was funny, even the new planet that wanted him, Crag, to colonize it. And bring other criminals, the toughest ones he could find, with him.

Male and female ones both?—or hadn't that ridiculous little sphere which was gathering a new world about it thought of that? He roared with laughter at how stupid the sphere had been not to have thought of that. How long could an all-male colony last?

Still—he had a serious thought—with a planet completely new and raw, perhaps that would be best at the very start, until they had the planet licked. Once they had living quarters and living arrangements and knew what was deadly and what wasn't; that would be the time for a return trip somewhere to pick up women for themselves. Or the others could, anyway.

He, Crag, hated all women—except Evadne, and Evadne was dead. All other women were soft and corrupt, like the one he'd been engaged to so many years ago and who'd deserted him when he'd lost his hand and his spaceman's job. Well, she'd have had some tough times if she'd stuck with him; there wasn't any denying that. But he wondered if she was still alive and what she'd think if she knew where he was now and that he had a fortune in his pocket. Probably come running to see if she could get him back. Women were like that. *Women.*

He laughed harder. And drank more, and his mind became even clearer although some of the laughter went away.

He thought of Evadne, of her lush body and her copper hair and her clear blue eyes that were straight and honest in a world that was as crooked as a poker game in a Martian gambling joint and as ugly as Evadne was beautiful.

And he drank more and he didn't laugh at all; he seemed to see Evadne standing there before him in the dimly lighted room, and he rose to go to her, but when he reached her she wasn't there.

HE DRANK more and became angry and amused himself for a while walking about the suite smashing things that were smashable and some things that—by an ordinary man—wouldn't have been smashable at all. But Crag's missing hand had been replaced by a heavily weighted metal one—although he managed to carry it so lightly that no one suspected what a deadly weapon it was—and he could deal a blow with it that was as quick as the dart of a tsetse fly and had the authority of a sledgehammer. It wasn't a hand you'd want to be slapped with.

He smashed furniture and gambling equipment and the huge television screen and the equipment behind it. The hotel wouldn't mind; they'd simply put it on his bill—as the women and the bellboy and the liquor and even every minute he used the radio would be on his bill. The twenty credits—two hundred dollars—a day that one paid for a suite like this was mere-

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ly the starting point of all they billed you for.

But after a while he tired of smashing things and drank some more and then lay down on the divan and slept—not using or wanting to use the great seven by eight foot bed in the bedroom.

It was almost noon when he awakened. He felt terrible until he'd groped his way to the liquor cabinet and taken a shot of antihang and then a quick pick-up shot of the fiery Martian liquor.

After that he was able to look about at the shambles he'd made of the place, and to laugh. It looked better that way, he thought.

Just the same, he stopped at the desk on his way out. A tall man in archaic full dress was behind it. Crag said, "The manager, please."

"I am the manager, Mr. Carleton. You are Mr.—ah—Ah?"

"Yes. There was a hurricane in my room last night. You will please have it refurnished immediately. Except, perhaps, for the television set. I think I will be happier without a television set. The refurnishing, at my expense, of course."

"Of course, sir. We shall have it done at once. There will, also, be put on your bill a charge for temporary incapacitation of the—ah—bellboy."

"Well worth it," Crag said. He went into the restaurant of the hotel and ordered and ate a meal. It was a wonderful meal made up of the choicest viands of three planets and it cost him more than he had earned in a week back in the days when he'd been a spaceman. He wondered why he didn't enjoy it especially. Even the rare vintage wines served with it didn't taste right although he knew that they were the best money could buy.

He wandered into the main gambling saloon and managed to divest himself of forty credits in the *mara* game, but the dealing was so obviously crooked that he played along merely for the privilege of watching so crude an exhibition. Even with only one good hand, he could have done better himself.

Finally, in utter disgust, he slapped his metal left hand down—not too hard—on the hand of the dealer who was passing a card to him. The dealer screamed and dropped two cards, where only one should have been. Then he stepped back, moaning, to nurse his broken hand. Crag left his bet and walked out.

Probably, he thought with grim amusement, he'd be billed for that, too.

He went back up to his suite and found it refurnished and in perfect shape. Even the monster television screen had been replaced; probably they'd billed him for twice its value and hoped he'd break it again.

Again, and more strongly, the sheer magnificence and expensiveness of the suite struck him and he laughed and then wondered, *what am I doing here?*

He poured himself a drink and then wandered over to the wall-radio and turned it on. Politics again. He went to the pneumatic divan and sat down with the bottle in one hand and a glass in the other and managed not to listen to that part of the newscast. But then he found himself leaning slightly forward to listen as, again, the newscaster's voice changed from simulated to genuine interest.

"The new planet between Mars and Jupiter is now complete, a sphere larger than Mars, almost identical with Earth in size. Slightly larger, in fact. Apparently estimates of the total volume of mass of the asteroids erred on the short side, due to the great number of asteroids too small to have been charted.

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"Strangely, considering the suddenness of its formation, the surface seems to be quite stable, free from quakes and convulsions. Landing parties will be organized very soon from among the patrol ships which have been observing the planet's formation. Pardon me a second—

"I have just been handed a bulletin informing me that the new planet has been named. Dr. Wilkins of Marsport Observatory has, with the concurrence of his colleagues chosen the name Cragon—C-r-a-g-o-n, Cragon."

Crag put back his head and laughed.

CHAPTER IV

HE THOUGHT, *the little devil, names himself after me.* For Crag knew it couldn't be a coincidence that Cragon had been chosen as a name, even though a man he'd never heard of and who had never heard of him had done the choosing. Cragon had named itself; it must have planted that thought in the minds of the astronomers at Marsport Observatory when it had been here on Mars studying conditions and deciding what it was to do.

The announcer was going on. "The name has no special mythological derivation, Dr. Wilkins explains. It was chosen arbitrarily as a euphonious combination of syllables. All other planets, as you know, were named after prominent characters in ancient mythology, but the practice was abandoned after the discovery of so many asteroids that all such names had been used.

"In a few hours we shall be able to give you reports from the first landing parties."

And back to politics and the elections.

Crag shut off the newsradio. He got himself another drink and sat down with it, still chuckling. *Thinks he's going to get me that way,* he thought.

He had a few more drinks and then looked around the suite and decided that he hated it worse than any place he'd ever been in. He wanted to smash things again, but he knew that would be purposeless and that he wouldn't get any real pleasure out of doing it a second time.

But he had to get away from it for a while. He remembered, though, how much money he had and decided it wouldn't be safe to carry all of it. No one would take it away from him while he was conscious, but if he ended up—as he probably would—in a spaceman's dive, he didn't want to have to watch how much he drank.

He thought of putting it in a bank, but that would be even more dangerous; you could trust banks with small amounts, but with a sum like that they'd finagle him out of it some way. Besides, such a deposit in cash might interest government investigators if they heard about it, and they'd investigate him and want to know where he got it. And they'd try to take it away from him if the bank didn't. The vault of the hotel would be even more risky.

He took the money out of his pocket and studied what to do with it. There were still nineteen ten-thousand-credit bills; he'd broken only one of them. He decided that hiding the nineteen bills in various places about the suite would be safest.

He did a good job of hiding them, and when he left he did a bit of work on the lock of the door with some tiny tools he carried; no one could open it but himself when he'd finished with it.

When he got to Spaceman's Row, he thought at first he was on the wrong street. It had changed tremendously, but he remembered now that the change had already started the

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last time he'd been there, four years before. Some of the dives had been cleaned up and prettied up then; now, they all were. The picturesqueness was gone and if there was any dirt you couldn't see it for neon.

He walked the length of it, looking for a familiar place and failing to find one, before he chose the least garish of the bars and went in.

A FEW spacemen, with girls, were at the bar drinking and watching a television screen. The spacemen looked young, callow and almost effeminate compared to the men who used to fly the spaceways.

Crag paid no attention to them after a first glance, taking a stool at the bar and facing away from the television screen.

The bartender, although he was dressed in a fancy monkey suit, looked almost human, although his eyes were a little too shifty for Crag's taste.

He grinned when Crag ordered a woji. "Guess you haven't been around Marsport recently. Illegal now."

"Had some this morning," Crag said.

"Must've been at a fancy hotel. The law doesn't bother them, but it's sure clamped down on Spaceman's Row. It ain't what it used to be."

"So I notice."

"Nothing stronger than kodore. No fights now, no nothing. Plenty of women, though. Dope, if you want it, except the kinds that might make you feel scrappy. Nope, it ain't what it used to be."

Crag took the well stuffed wallet from his pocket. He put a five-credit bill on the bar, a dozen times the price of a glass of woji. He looked at the bartender inquiringly.

The bartender looked at the bill and then slid it off the bar and into his pocket. "Just a minute," he said.

Crag nodded and the bartender went through a door at the back and, a moment later, came back through it and nodded at Crag, beckoning.

Crag followed him through the door and closed it behind him. There was a bottle of woji on the table, and a glass. Crag reached for the bottle and the bartender stuck a heat-gun in his side. "Up," he said.

Crag raised his hands—apparently quite casually, but as they reached shoulder level the left hand—the metal one—flicked just slightly against the bartender's chin. The bartender and the heat-gun fell, separately. Crag pocketed the heat-gun.

He sat down at the table and poured himself a drink After a few minutes the bartender blinked his eyes and then sat up, touching his chin gingerly and wincing. He looked at Crag curiously and Crag grinned at him. "Have a drink," he said. "Get yourself a glass."

The bartender got up slowly and then got himself a glass and another chair. Crag poured him a drink.

The bartender sipped it, staring at Crag. He said slowly, "You hit me with your left hand, lightly. So it's a metal one and weighted. I've heard stories about a guy named Crag. They're almost legends. And he was in Marsport four years ago and so were you. My name's Gardin and I'm sorry I tried to take you."

"That's all right," Crag said. They shook hands.

Gardin said, "Listen, Crag, don't flash that much dough. Not because of criminals; there aren't many of them—of us—left. On account of the law. The bulls pick up anybody they don't know who flashes money and the judges fine him every cent he's got on him and split with the bulls. It's not like the old days when a man had a chance."

Gardin stared straight ahead for a

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moment. "I wanted to get out of this place; that's why I tried to take you. Only, Crag, where is there to go that's any better?"

"Nowhere," Crag told him. "Have another drink."

"I better get back to the bar. Come on, I'll bring the woji with us, only I'll pour it in a kodore bottle. Same color and nobody'll know the difference."

They went back to the bar and Crag poured them each a drink while Gardin poured refills for the spacemen and their women. He came back to Crag.

He said quietly, "Careful if any coppers come in. Down that stuff quick and I'll cap the bottle. You can smell woji yards away and them coppers have noses."

Crag glanced at the spacemen and Gardin said contemptuously, "Don't worry about them; they never even smelled woji. Just out of school and don't know which way is up."

CRAG NODDED and turned to glance at the big television screen which the other group was watching. On the screen an almost naked woman was singing a more than suggestive song of the delights of perversion. The spacemen and their women watched with rapt attention, but when the song ended, they finished their drinks and left.

Crag said, "Shut the thing off."

Gardin started for the switch, but before he reached it, the scene changed; on the screen was a planet floating in space, seen from a distance of about ten thousand miles. It wasn't a planet Crag had ever seen before. The telecaster's voice said, "We bring you a special broadcast of the first landing on the new planet Cragon, suddenly and miraculously formed of the scattered matter of the asteroid belt between—"

Gardin was reaching for the switch, but Crag said sharply, "Don't. Leave it on."

He was studying the new planet with amazement. There were seas on it and he thought he could make out rivers and different colored patches that could only be vegetation—probably huge forests. *Water*, he thought with sudden curiosity; *where could it have got water*? And then he remembered that the entity which had been an asteroid had transmuted carbon dioxide in his helmet into oxygen. So why couldn't it transmute any element into any other one? Even so, how could it have created vegetation upon itself so quickly?

"The view upon the screen," said the voice of the telecaster, "is from a port of the mother ship. We shall maintain this distance above the surface while a two-man scouter we have sent out makes the first actual landing. It is on its way now and should reach the upper atmosphere within less than a minute. When it does we shall switch you to the voice of Captain Burke who has command of the scouter; Lieutenant Laidlaw is with him. The scouter is too small to hold a telecaster, so the view upon the screen will continue to be from the mother ship. However, if the scouter makes a successful landing and gives us the come-on signal, this ship shall follow it to the surface and you will have a close view of whatever lies on Cragon.

"The landing will be made regardless of the nature of the atmosphere, which has thus far defied complete spectroscopic analysis from a distance. Oxygen is present in about the same proportion as in the atmosphere of Earth, but there are other gasses present, one of which has new and unknown Fraunhofer lines, undoubtedly the lines of a hitherto undiscovered element.

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"If you have missed recent newscasts and telecasts, I might tell you that it has been determined that the density of Cragon is about that of Earth, as is its gravity. The proportion of land to water is much greater, about half—as against Earth's one-fifth. The land surface, therefore, is almost two and a half times that of Earth, truly a magnificent place for colonization—if the air is breathable.

"I have a signal from Captain Burke. He is ready to cut in. Go ahead, Captain."

A DIFFERENT voice spoke. "Captain Burke talking from the scouter ship. We are entering the upper atmosphere. We are above the largest continent of Cragon. We are fifty miles high and our instruments show a slight increase of atmospheric pressure, although still not much over a laboratory vacuum—about the same reading for an equivalent height above Earth. We are descending at the rate of five miles a minute, although we shall have to slow our descent soon.

"We can see from here—I think with certainty—that the dark areas of the land surface really are forests, incredible as that is. At least they look the same as Earth's forest areas look from an equivalent height—forty-five miles now."

Crag grinned at Gardin. "They'll never make it. Bet you."

"Huh? Why not?"

"Atmosphere poisonous."

"So what?" They're in a spaceship. That won't stop them from landing. And they won't get out without suits until they've checked the air."

"Bet they don't land. A thousand credits to the five I just gave you for the woji."

Gardin laughed. "You're crazy, Crag, but that's sure a bet."

They turned back to the screen.

"Thirty miles now, almost into the stratosphere. Something seems to be wrong with the air conditioner in this scouter. It's getting hard to breathe. Lieutenant Laidlaw is working with it. Getting it fixed, Lieutenant?

"He says he can't find anything wrong with it, and our oxygen indicator shows normal quantity. Can't understand it. We're twenty-two miles now. But both of us breathing hard. I —can't figure what's—"

Crag looked at Gardin. "Double the bet?"

Gardin shook his head.

The voice was labored. "We're going—back up. Something's wrong and it's not—our air conditioner. Going—fast as we can—take it. Thirty miles again. Not—quite so bad. Almost breathe.

"Checking with Laidlaw. Says—our air normal, but an added ingredient. The unknown element. Came right through the hull—osmosis or something. Thirty-five miles.

"We're all right now. But returning to the mother ship for a conference."

Crag grinned at Gardin and then walked over and shut off the television set. Gardin took the five credit note out of his pocket and put it on the bar. But he said, "I don't get it. How'd you know before it happened?"

"Inside information. That's one planet they'll *never* land on. Not alive, anyway. If they ever lick that trick, my pal's got other ones up his sleeve."

"Your pal?"

"Cragon. Named himself after me." Crag took another sip of his drink. "The little—"

"*Who*?"

"Cragon. I just told you. Listen, Gardin, how'd you like to—no, skip it." Crag turned morosely back to his drink.

The door behind Crag opened sud-

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denly. Crag turned and saw three uniformed policemen—tough-looking mugs all, with heat-guns in spring holsters ready for action—coming in the door. Crag turned back to the bar casually and downed the last of his drink, and Gardin, equally casually, picked up the bottle and was replacing the cap, turning toward the back bar as he did so.

But the closest copper was sniffing audibly. "Hey, you," he told Gardin, "let's see that bottle."

Crag turned his head and saw that all three of them had heat-guns in their hands, one of them aiming at him and two of them at Gardin. It was going to be a stick-up, a legal stick-up—and to make it legal probably both Gardin and he would get five-year sentences on the technicality of selling and buying, respectively, a forbidden beverage.

CHAPTER V

CRAG GLANCED back over the bar and, before Gardin turned, he caught Gardin's eyes in the mirror. Just for a fleeting instant, but enough. The eyes said, "We'll make a break if we can."

Crag turned back on the stool, very casually, raising his hands at the menace of the heat-gun pointing at him and only two feet from him. A quick flick of his eyes downward showed him that it was going to be almost too easy; the safety stud of the heater was still in safe position and it would take the copper almost a second to fire. Obviously he wasn't anticipating trouble, with three armed men against two unarmed ones. The copper guarding Crag was at the bar beside him, the other two were also at the bar, and beyond. Gardin was turning around with the bottle.

It was almost too easy. Crag practically fell forward off the stool, his right hand, from a raised position, pistoning out for the jaw of the copper and his metal left hand chopping down at the heater. And he kept on going forward, pushing the first copper back against the others. Number one's heater hit the floor as he went back, unconscious from the blow to his chin. Number two went down, too, and Crag, keeping going right across Number one, put his left hand in Number two's stomach, just above the belt buckle.

Number three, knocked off balance against the bar, had time to trigger his heater wildly and the backbar mirror shattered under sudden heat as Gardin, who'd taken a reversed grip on the bottle, leaned across the bar and broke it over Number three's head.

Crag gathered the three heaters and looked quickly toward the window. No one was passing by. Gardin quickly came around the bar and helped Crag drag them into the back room. None of them was dead. Gardin got a stack of bar towels and started tearing them into strips; within minutes all three of the coppers were bound and gagged so efficiently that they wouldn't get loose, by their own efforts, for hours.

Gardin mopped sweat off his forehead and looked at Crag. Crag grinned. "You ruined that bottle of woji," he said. "Got another?"

Gardin got another and they went back to the bar. While Gardin filled their glasses, Crag fiddled with the dials of the television set. A blonde tenor with marcelled hair was singing:

"Jet up! Jet down! On a slow ship to Pluto!"

Crag switched it off and went back to the bar.

Gardin said worriedly, "We had to do it; if we hadn't, it'd've been five or ten years for each of us. But now

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it's life if they get us. What do we do, Crag?"

Crag suddenly knew, and he knew now that he'd known all along, that it had been only a matter of time until he'd decided.

"We go to Cragon," he said.

"But—the poisonous atmosphere!"

"I've got an in. It won't be poisonous for me, or for anyone I take with me. Do you know any others that would like to go? I've got a ship that will carry half a dozen for that short a trip."

"You serious, Crag?"

Crag nodded.

"I've got a pal that'll go. And his woman and mine."

"How long have we got?"

GARDIN looked up at the clock in the wall. "Seven hours. I'd just started my shift. If I lock the door when we go, nobody'll bother the place till the next bartender comes here; everybody'll just think the place is closed."

"Want to call your friends from here?"

Gardin mopped his forehead again. "Sooner I get out of here—with those cops tied up back there—the better I'll feel. Let's go."

They left the place and Gardin closed the blinds and locked it.

"My woman lives just around the corner," Gardin said, "and Pete Hauser and his woman live only a block away. Shall we get them first?"

Crag said, "I'm going to buy an aircar. We'll need one to get to the spaceship and it'll be easier to buy one than to take a chance of being checked on if we hire one."

"You got enough money you'd *buy* an aircar just for one trip and leave it?"

Crag laughed. "Sure. And what good's money where we're going? I've got a hundred and ninety thousand credits back at the hotel and no use for it at all. But we'll go back and get it anyway, just in case."

Gardin whistled. "Pal, with *that* much money, we can buy our way out of this rap. We wouldn't have to lam."

"Don't you want to go?"

"Sure, sure. Look, this is the house. Can you pick us up here in an hour?"

Crag caught an aircab and went to the biggest aircar agency in Marsport. He was whistling now and felt happier than he'd felt in years. He wondered why he'd taken so long to make up his mind.

It took him less than an hour to complete the purchase of a five-place aircar and get it serviced and fueled for a five-hundred mile trip. It was just turning dusk when he returned to the doorway where he'd left Gardin.

Four people were waiting for him there. Gardin's woman, a big blonde named Stell. Pete Hauser, a little man—but tough-looking—with a rodent face and beady eyes. Gert, small and dark, Gypsy-looking, quick and graceful in her movements. And Gardin, who had switched from his monkey-suit into spaceman's gear. He'd guessed right, then, about Gardin's having been a spaceman *once*—in the days when the spaceways weren't a tea party.

Crag drove them to the Luxor and suggested a stirrup cup in his suite.

The lock of his door hadn't been disturbed. He let them in and enjoyed—but not too much—watching the eyes of the two women as they took in the luxury of the gubernatorial suite. He opened the liquor closet and told them to help themselves and pour one for him while he gathered the money and decided what part of his luggage he'd take along.

The first ten thousand credit bill

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wasn't where he'd hidden it. Nor the second. Nor any of them.

CRAG SAT down, frowning, to drink the woji Stell brought him, and to think. It couldn't have been an outside job. The suite was accessible only through the door he'd fixed so no one but himself could open the lock. There must be a secret entrance somewhere and the hotel itself must have done the job. Besides, it would have taken a more detailed search to have found *all* of those bills than any casual thief could have made or would have dared to make.

After buying the aircar he still had several thousand credits and money would be useless on Cragon, anyway, but—

He told the others what had happened and sent each to a different room of the suite to look for a secret entrance. Pete Hauser found it, cleverly concealed in the shelving of the pornographic library.

Grag turned down Gardin's offer of help and told them all to wait. The secret entrance was locked from the outside, but that gave him only a minute's pause. Then he was in a narrow passageway and going down several narrow flights of padded steps. He passed other secret doors of other suites, all locked from his side, and he could have burgled as many suites as he wished—but there wasn't any reason to. He'd never stolen for the fun of it, and he didn't need money now, whether he got his own back or not.

There were peepholes into all the suites, too, an intricate system of them. More than peepholes, really; they were fair sized portions of the walls that were transparent from one side and not from the other. He realized now that he must have been watched while he was hiding the bills; otherwise, in the few hours he'd been out, no search would have found every last one of them.

He decided that he didn't like the Luxor Hotel nor its management. Glancing casually through the transparent areas into some of the suites he passed, he decided he didn't like the clientele of the place, either. In fact, he didn't like Marsport; he didn't like civilization in general—as civilization was just then.

And he particularly decided that he didn't like the manager of the Luxor, who undoubtedly had sole access to this system of secret corridors, peepholes and entrances.

When he'd counted enough flights to know that he was on the main floor he started looking for—and found—a panel that locked from the other side. That would be either the manager's office or his private quarters. There wasn't any peephole for him to scout through, so he picked the lock more quietly than he had ever picked one before.

He inched the panel open silently. It opened into the manager's office. He could see the manager's back, as the panel opened behind the desk. Mr. Carleton still wore the archaic full dress suit, almost the only one Crag had ever seen.

Crag stepped out of the panel, more quietly than any cat. He reached his right hand around the scrawny neck of the manager and pulled back, squeezing just hard enough to prevent any outcry and pulling back just far enough to keep Carleton's groping hands from reaching any of the buttons on or under his desk.

"Where is the money?" he asked quietly.

He relaxed pressure enough to permit a whisper, and when none came, he tightened his fingers again. A thin hand came up and pointed to a metal door with a combination knob set in the wall directly across the

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room from where he stood.

"Come on," Crag said. "You're going with me while I open it, and if any help comes—whether you manage to call for it or not—you die when it gets here."

He pulled the man up out of the chair and walked him across the room until they stood facing the safe, Carleton between Crag and the door of it.

Crag said, "I'm letting go your neck now. Yell as loud as you want, if you want to make it your last yell."

He put his left arm around the manager's body and held tight while he reached for the combination knob with his right.

The manager didn't yell, but he squeaked—and both of his hands grabbed for Crag's wrist. "Don't! It's booby-trapped, and I'll die too if I'm standing here. Let me open it."

CRAG GRINNED and let him open it. There was quite a bit of money in the safe, although Crag's were the only ten thousand credit bills. Crag took it all except the change and the one and five credit bills; there were so many of those that his pockets wouldn't have held all of them.

He took Carleton back with him through the secret panel and there bound and gagged him with strips torn from the manager's dress coat.

He felt good again, despite some of the things he'd seen through the passageway peepholes. And he felt a little reckless—or maybe it was the woji. He leaned forward and whispered to Carleton, "If you report this, tell them to look for Crag. On the planet Cragon." He laughed. "Crag of Cragon."

He went back up the secret stairs and passageways to his own suite. He found that he must have been gone a little longer than he thought, for both of the women were drunk and Pete was almost so. Even Gardin's eyes were a little glassy.

Crag made all of them take sober-up powders and, since he was going to pilot the aircar and the spaceship, he himself took a neobenzedrine. He settled for a very few items out of the many things he'd bought before coming to the Luxor—all things that he could carry in his pockets so they wouldn't attract attention crossing the lobby.

"Get the money?" Gardin had asked him and he'd nodded and said, "With interest. Compound."

Maybe, he thought, they'd use that money to light fires with when they got to Cragon, but at any rate he hadn't left it with the manager of the Luxor.

They made the aircar without being questioned and Crag piloted the aircar slowly and carefully, not to attract attention, until they were well out of Marsport before he put on speed.

The spaceship was still where he'd left it, and that was good; he could have bought another—dozens of them—with all the money he had, but the delay would have been a risk.

Twenty hours later they landed on Cragon. Because the others lacked his confidence, Crag put the ship down through the atmosphere very slowly, ready to jerk it up quickly if any of them had any difficulty in breathing, but none of them had.

Just before the ship touched the surface, a voice in Crag's mind said, "Welcome, Crag." He answered mentally, not aloud, and looked at the others quickly to see if they had received any equivalent message; obviously none of them had.

HE PUT the ship down gently in a perfect landing and opened the door without bothering to test the

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atmosphere. He stepped out, the others following him. The air was like the air of Earth on a crisp autumn morning. They were on a plain that stretched down to a river. There was short grass where they stood, bushes between them and the river; behind them was what might easily have been a forest of Earth and beyond the forest rose tall rugged mountains.

Crag liked it. He felt content and at peace.

He wondered what to do first and flashed a mental question, but there wasn't any answer—and that was answer enough. They were on their own and Cragon wasn't going to advise them.

He took a deep breath and turned to face the others. "All right," he said. "We're here. We start to work."

"Work?" Pete Hauser's rodent face looked surprised.

"Work," said Crag. "We'll find food—there'll be game in that forest and fish in that river and we'll find some edible plants that we can domesticate and grow. But we'll have to work for all of it. All of us. And since we've got food for a few days in the ship, the first job's to build ourselves quarters. The ship's too small for five people to *live* in."

"Build out of what?" Gardin wanted to know.

Both Gert and Stell looked displeased and petulant. Crag stared at them and wondered what they'd expected to find on a new planet.

He answered Gardin's question within an hour. There was clay along the river bank that would dry into good adobe bricks. He vetoed Stell's suggestion that they all have a binge to celebrate—although from her face she didn't seem to think there was much *to* celebrate—and put all of them, including himself, to work shaping clay bricks and putting them in the sun to dry.

The others worked listlessly and none of them, even Gardin, who tried to pretend interest, got very many bricks formed. Gert cut a finger on a stone in the clay and rebelled, her dark face sullen. She sat and watched the others, angry because Crag had locked the door of the ship and had kept the key; he curtly refused to give it to her so she could get a bottle and drink.

He kept them, and himself, at work until sundown.

They slept in the ship that night, and Crag slept lightly, but nothing happened.

The next morning he put Hauser and the two women back at the brick-making and he and Gardin went into the forest and found that he'd been right in guessing that there was game, although it was small and wary and was going to take very skilled hunting to get.

That night he again refused to let them get drunk, and he could feel the resentment against him, palpable as a Venusian fog.

He slept even more lightly that night, but the break he'd been expecting didn't come until morning. It came in the form of a heatgun being shoved into his back as he was leaving the ship. Pete Hauser's voice said, "And don't try to use that metal hand of yours. I know about it. I can pull the trigger first. Keep your hands down."

Crag kept his hands down and turned around. He looked at Gardin and Gardin couldn't quite meet his eyes. He didn't have to ask if they were all in it.

Crag reached out casually and slapped the heater out of Hauser's hand—not until after Hauser had pulled the trigger, though, and nothing had happened. Crag said, "I unloaded it, unloaded all of them. All right,

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Gardin, you do the talking. What do you want? To elect your own leader? Or what?"

GARDIN cleared his throat uncomfortably. "We want to go back, Crag. None of us have ever lived—wild, like this. We find we don't like it. We'd rather take our chances on Earth or Mars. We don't care whether you come with us or not, just so we get back."

Gert said, "But if you don't, if you're staying here, you might as well give us some—or all—of that money you've got. It's no good to you here."

Stell's voice was plaintive. "Please let us go, Crag. Or if you want the ship, take us back and then come here yourself."

Crag said, "I'm going to think it over. I'll be back."

He walked toward the forest, thinking. It was going to be lonesome and yet—well, he *wasn't* going back, ever. And to have others here wasn't any good unless they wanted to be here.

He tried thinking messages to Cragon, to get Cragon's advice, but there wasn't any answering voice in his mind. He was being left strictly alone in his decision.

He walked back to the spaceship and the four people waiting for him there.

He said, "Okay, take the ship and get out. Unload everything in it I can use and then take it. And here—" He took off the money belt with almost three hundred thousand credits in it and tossed it to them. "Divide this on the way. I'll give you the key to the controls when you've unloaded the ship."

They worked fast, willingly this time, obviously afraid he might change his mind.

An hour later, standing beside a tarpaulin covered pile of supplies that represented everything movable that had been in the ship, he watched it go.

He felt dull inside, neither happy nor unhappy. This was the way it was going to be. This was his world, and here he was going to stay until he died. He'd be lonesome, sure, but he was used to that. And, even alone, this was better than the cesspools of Earth, Mars or Venus. He'd thought once that having a fortune might make those places worth living in; he'd found out that it had made them worse.

He watched the speck out of sight in the blue and then sighed and started for the river to carry on with his brick-making. That still came first—or he thought then that it did.

But he'd taken only a few steps when the voice that was Cragon spoke in his mind.

"They were too soft, Crag. They weren't tough, like you are, tough enough to lick a new planet. I knew when I first contacted their minds that they wouldn't stay."

"Yeah," said Crag listlessly.

"That is why I waited," said the voice in his mind. "I made sure *you* wanted to stay here, even if it was to be alone. But it won't be alone, Crag."

"Yeah," Crag said. He supposed it wouldn't be quite so lonely if Cragon talked to him once in a while.

There was something in his mind like laughter, not his own. The voice said, "No, not I, Crag. I have other things to do, and this may be the last time I ever communicate with you. I mean—Evadne."

Crag stopped walking as though he had run into a stone wall.

"Remember what happened to Evadne, Crag? The disintegrator, yes.

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But every atom of her body remained, on the surface of the tiny ball of neutronium that I became, before she was disintegrated. It was simple to segregate them and preserve them, Crag, against your return. And I was conscious, Crag, a conscious entity, even before she disintegrated. The structure of her body and her mind was the first thing I studied, before I entered *your* mind, out there when I first spoke to you."

Crag's mind reeled. *"But she's dead. You can't—"*

"What is death, Crag? Can you define it for me? Can you tell me why, if every atom is replaced into its position in every molecule, just as it was—"

"But can you? Are you sure?"

"I have. She's coming this way now, Crag, from the edge of the woods. If you'll only turn, you'll see her coming."

Crag turned and saw her. He started to run toward her and saw the gladness in her face when she saw him coming.

"You won't need to explain, Crag; I've told her everything that has happened. Goodbye, Crag; I'm leaving your mind now."

Crag may or may not have answered that thought in his mind. He had his arms around Evadne, her soft body pressed against his. And they had a world of their own, a new world, to live in—and to populate.

THE COMPLICATED ATOM

★ by RAMSEY SINCLAIR ★

ONE OF THE major aims of science is to make things simple, to reduce the complex activities of natural events to a series of easy, simple rules. But things seldom work out that way. From about nineteen hundred on, science has been getting more and more complicated and the nice understandable theories of the time prior to that period, are no longer extant. Instead despite quantum theory and relativity in physics, for example and despite our tremendous increase in general knowledge, we find that we really know less of the fundementals now than ever before!

Consider the atom. Before nineteen hundred the simple atom of electrons whirling around a tiny nucleus satisfied everybody and explained so much. As the probing got stronger and the tools of the physicists more powerful, it appeared that the atom was a whole lot more complicated than anyone thought. Protons, electrons, neutrons, mesons, positrons, photons and God knows what else stepped on the stage.

In recent years with the uncovery of atomic energy, things are deteriorating at an accelerated rate. Every time a nice simple theory is proposed some scientist throws a monkey wrench in the works. The best example of that in recent *months* is the discovery of two British physicists who have uncovered two short-lived atomic —or rather, sub-atomic—particles.

In examining photographic plates which had been exposed to cosmic radiation, they noted the trails of tracks left by two *unknown particles whose presence could* not be explained in any known terms. Certain facts about them were apparent however.

Particle no. one is neutral to start with, then splits into a forked track consisting of two paticles. Particle no. two starts out with a track, then abruptly turns indicating that it has split into a charged and neutral particle.

But what is most amazing is the fact that these sub-atomic particles have the short life of about ten-billionths of a second! Anything else about them is *strictly unknown. Their purpose, their* peculiar properties—none of these things are understood.

But what is worse, the scientists predict that undoubtedly as more is learned about the atom, it will be discovered that that little devil is a lot more complex than anyone thought it was. There is no simple explanation.

But the boys in the labs haven't thrown up their hands yet. They'll keep hammering away and pretty soon some good theorist will settle and have a nice clear explanation of everything—until a few years later when the lab boys knock it out again...

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The SCREAMING SHAPES

By Franklin Gregory

Was it the filth from a hundred factories that spawned these hideous, formless killers?

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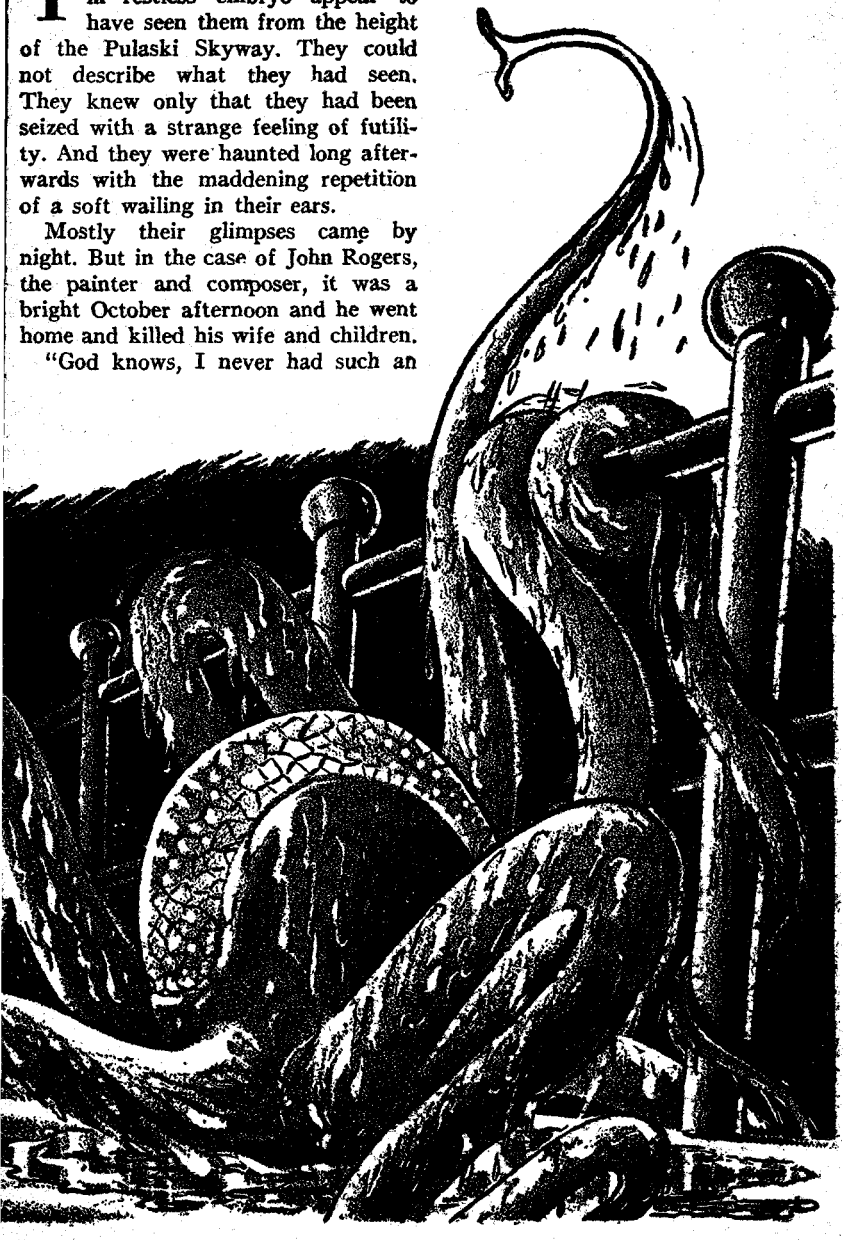
THOSE WHO first saw them in restless embryo appear to have seen them from the height of the Pulaski Skyway. They could not describe what they had seen. They knew only that they had been seized with a strange feeling of futility. And they were haunted long afterwards with the maddening repetition of a soft wailing in their ears.

Mostly their glimpses came by night. But in the case of John Rogers, the painter and composer, it was a bright October afternoon and he went home and killed his wife and children.

"God knows, I never had such an



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intention," he said at his trial.

He had been driving along the Skyway in heavy traffic when he idly glanced down into the dark and oily waters of the Hackensack River two hundred feet below. And it was then, he said, that the compulsion came upon him.

"I couldn't bear to think of them suffering such horrors," he said.

He did not amplify this, nor did counsel ask him to. He spoke tonelessly, as if he knew that words were vain. And his eyes were terribly dilated just as they had been when the Montclair police found him in his home staring wonderingly at the twisted bodies of the wife and son and daughter he had strangled. And just as his eyes had remained when he was removed to the death house in the State Prison at Trenton.

Only Buckham, who had interviewed him, suspected how desperately he wished to live.

"I want to find out what I saw," Rogers said. And he shook his head quickly as if trying to rid his ears of the distracting sound that still clung there.

Later, Buckham found the prison officials curiously reluctant to discuss the condemned's last days in his cell.

"What the hell, Zenas, he's dead, isn't he?" the warden said. "Isn't it enough that he's dead?"

He spoke as if he were relieved to get rid of Rogers—which he was. And not for any sound reason, but only because the sight of the man had disconcerted him so.

Buckham's left eyelid lowered in a look that always seemed to make public officials vaguely uncomfortable. They could never tell just what Buckham knew and how much.

"Dead?" Buckham repeated. "Well, now, of course if you mean by death—"

Warden Haynes had no intention of getting involved in one of Buckham's metaphysical discussions.

"Oh, go ahead," he grumbled. "Talk to anybody you want to."

AS IT TURNED out, John Rogers had been pretty much left to himself those last days. Hogan, the night turnkey, said:

"I'd poke my light on him now and again when I'd come by and he'd be layin' there on his cot, starin' up at the ceilin'. He'd turn his head like he saw something crawlin' along the ceilin'. There wasn't nothin' there, but godamighty it sure gimme the creeps."

And Markle, the day turnkey, said:

"He left some drawings on the wall. You know—in chalk. Not bad drawings, either, though Lord knows what they're meant to be. I looked at 'em once and whether it was them that made me sick to my stomach or something I ate, I don't know. But I took no second look. No—nobody's been in there since..."

He fumbled with the key while inserting it in the lock of the steel door. And when the door swung open, he found it convenient to go off somewhere on an errand. Buckham learned why when he saw what Rogers had drawn. It was with the greatest of self control that he could focus his camera. Not even the strangeness of the execution had prepared him for this!

Buckham had seen that, of course—just as he had reported every New Jersey execution for eleven years. Mostly, they followed a pattern. Each was the closing chapter of a big crime story. But always there was enough variation in detail to challenge the interest of such a connoisseur as Buckham, who kept copious notes and meant sometime to write a book about the deaths he had seen. The variations in the electrocution of John

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Rogers seemed so extreme as to convince him that here was not the end of a story, but the beginning.

Rogers' eyes were still wide with that spectral, questioning stare when he was led into the execution chamber. He walked steadily; then, just before he was seated in the chair, he recognized Buckham and smiled faintly.

Buckham had a feeling that he was still smiling and that his eyes were still staring even after the hood dropped over his head. And once, the shrouded head shook quickly as if still trying to shake off some sonic annoyance.

Buckham always watched the hands. He believed that the hands told much about the last thoughts of a condemned man when you could no longer see his face. Some hands were wet with sweat; some, limp with terror; some were normally relaxed, and some clutched the chair arms as if holding desperately onto life. Always, after the current surged through the body, the hands clenched and remained so.

But as the executioner moved toward the control board, Rogers' hands were different from any Buckham had ever seen. They were lifted slightly, the fingers spread out as if feeling for something in the dark. Suddenly, from behind the hood, came Rogers' voice, chill and startling in its intensity:

"I can't find it! God knows I've tried—but I can't find it. Mr. Buckham, will you try to find it?"

The moaning hum of the electric power came on then. And during the moments before the prison surgeon pronounced death, Buckham became aware of the two great variations:

The hands never clenched, but still remained spread out as if feeling for something, and—there was none of the acrid smell of burning flesh.

LATER, there was the haunting testimony of Moriarity, the mortician who had embalmed the body. A drunkard, this Moriarity. Buckham meant some day to do an essay on the causes of alcoholism among undertakers.

"The eyelids," Moriarity said slowly, looking into his glass, "wouldn't shut. I closed them...and when I turned around, they were open again. And the eyes! Great God, they were crazy to look at! Searching, you know, and devilishly intelligent. And when I finally sewed them shut, I felt like a murderer myself."

"You ought to lay off that stuff," Buckham said, glancing with disapproval at the bottle. But he did not speak skeptically. Moriarity concentrated on his glass.

"My God, Zenas!" he exclaimed suddenly. "Do you think he was really dead?"

Buckham grunted.

"If *you* don't know, who would?"

Driving back to Newark that evening, Buckham half wished that he, like Moriarity, were a drinking man. It seemed such an easy way to solve one's troubles. Already he was beginning to feel a fierce resentment against John Rogers—much like that which he had seen on the faces of judge and jurors and jailers. It is a phenomenon of nature that people do not like what they cannot understand; and Buckham considered it grossly unfair for John Rogers to die as he had, using his dying breath to involve Buckham in his own disastrous problem.

"I can't find it! Mr. Buckham, will you try to find it?"

Find *what*, for God's sake? What decent man could have made such a request from the door of the tomb? But could any decent man ignore such a plea?

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Well—Buckham hadn't. Already he had talked to Haynes and Hogan and Markle and Moriarity. And he had stood in Rogers' cell, aghast at how the man had spent his last days on earth abusing his God-given talents. The very sight of what Rogers had chalked on the cell wall infected him like a loathsome disease—and of the dirgeful notes which Rogers the musician had marked beside what Rogers the painter had drawn, Buckham could only describe them in the words of Pope as chromatic tortures. They moaned in his ears.

On the seat beside him lay the leather-cased Leica with the exposed film in it, and for a moment Buckham had an impulse to fling the equipment away. Just as he was impelled, too, to turn in the road and drive as far in the other direction as the land would take him.

That he did not surrender to this impulse was not only because of his strength of character, but because he knew too well that wherever he went he would still see Rogers' lean fingers reaching out, searching; and he would still see the driving stare of those questioning eyes. Failing to find an answer by himself, the man had achieved a horrid immortality by fastening his task on Buckham. And Buckham could see the eyes now, large, brilliant, compelling, racing toward him out of the night...

Only in time he swerved to avoid collision with the truck.

In Newark, Buckham stopped once—at the *Eagle's* art department to ask Ben Cutler, the head photographer, to develop and print up his film. Then he went to his hotel and up to his rooms. When he had unlocked and swung open the door, two things were happening. The telephone was ringing and a slim, pretty blonde was in the act of answering it.

"How," he asked, "in the devil did you get in here?"

Daisy Lovell ran to him and threw her warm, white arms around his neck.

"Magic," she cooed. "Miss me, hon?"

A CURIOUS character, this Zenas Buckham. A scarecrow of a man, lean-faced, with deep-set, brooding eyes and dark red, rebellious hair; a man careless of his dress and awkward of movement. No movie idol at all, and yet possessor of a rough masculinity that made feminine hearts beat faster.

A dozen years of newspapering had left him with little other ambition than the day-by-day reporting of events from such out-of-the-way police headquarters as those of Kearny and Harrison and East Newark and Arlington and Secaucus. Slum towns and factory towns, they circle the Jersey Meadows, that great, irregular tract of marshland that stretches between the converging Passaic River on the west and the Hackensack on the east.

From the Meadows you can see the skyscrapers of Manhattan rising over the Hudson Palisades beyond Weehawken and Hoboken and Jersey City. Long trains snake across the Meadows, bearing goods and people into the canyons which are formed by the skyscrapers. And here and there sprawling factories which make paints and lacquers and tar and roofing spew their waste into the rivers and creeks until the waters are covered with the green and yellow and red culms of poisonous pigments.

From the height of the Pulaski Skyway, which cuts across the Meadows with its miles-long viaducts of flying steel, the view by night is eerie and compelling. The waste gases of oil refineries burn atop the stacks like torches of giants. The red glare

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from the blast furnaces is reflected on the low clouds. And in the south, from the gloom of Newark Bay, sound the hollow whistles of tug boats and tankers.

Only a few poorly-lighted roads meander across the Meadows. And smog is frequent. Laden with sulphurous fumes from the smelters, it spreads out in a dense, yellow mist over the mud flats and marsh grasses. It smarts the eyes and nose. And when there is no smog, there is thick smoke and clouds of mineral dust which enter the lungs and cause silicosis.

So the air and the water and the land were poisoned. And it was Buckham's world, which he knew like few other men. And from the windows of his rooms, he could look out over the Passaic and across the Meadows.

It was not the Meadows, however, with which Buckham at the moment was concerned. Disengaging himself from Daisy's arms, he glanced about the apartment. Her jaunty hat rested on a table and through the far door he could see her suitcase open on the bed, exhibiting most indecently a collection of frilly underthings.

Buckham blinked. Daisy's pert face looked up at him.

"I got evicted," she said.

"Oh," Buckham replied.

"And I didn't have anywhere else to go," she continued.

"Oh," said Buckham.

It mustn't be supposed that Buckham minded having young ladies in his rooms, but he liked to be able to control the situation. And his knowledge of Daisy Lovell told him that he was not sure of his ability to control the situation here.

"And d'ya think your city editor would approve?" Buckham asked.

"Damn my city editor," said Daisy.

"I suppose," Buckham said, "I could move into the 'Y' until you find another apartment."

"Silly! I can sleep on the couch."

"Well—" said Buckham.

THE PHONE rang again. Buckham crossed the room, sat down and picked it up.

"Yes. Buckham talking."

Daisy curled up on Buckham's lap, nestling her ear close to the instrument so she could hear, too.

"Listen, you old ghoul! What's this I hear about John Rogers making a last crack to you just before he fried?"

Buckham smiled as he recognized the voice of Hap Ladner, the State Police lieutenant who had been in charge of the Rogers investigation. Daisy pouted and made eyes.

"Ah, now," Buckham said, "you know I'd interviewed him, and—"

"What was it he couldn't find?" Ladner demanded.

"Just—a reason." Buckham tried to push Daisy's face away.

"A reason?" shouted Ladner. "A reason for what?"

"Why he killed his wife and kids," Buckham said.

"But why *you*?"

"Because I knew him, I suppose. And because I know the Meadows."

There was a pause, then Ladner said slowly:

"I remember . . . he said something about seeing something in the Meadows, something that brought on the compulsion, but he couldn't say what." Suddenly he broke off. "Oh, hell!" he exclaimed.

Buckham listened. In the background, he could hear the crisp voice of a police radio announcer.

"Zenas! It's a bad crack-up, Zenas! Bus on fire. Communipaw Avenue at the drawbridge over the Hackensack. Can you see anything from up there, Zenas?"

Buckham sprang up so suddenly

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that he nearly spilled Daisy to the floor. He peered through the window at the night panorama which spread out below for miles. He could see a lighted tube train of the Hudson & Manhattan crawling across the flats toward Jersey City. To the east he could see the lights of traffic moving along the dim, high span of the Skyway. A tug boat, pulling a string of barges, had just passed under the span outward bound for the darkness of Newark Bay. And then, just beyond and below the Skyway, where a strand of ground lights charted the course of Communipaw Avenue he could see a wavering glare.

The glare brightened in a great white flash that lit up the sky, then faded.

"Something just blew up," he said into the phone.

"Christ!" exclaimed Ladner. "You going down?"

"Right away."

"See you," Ladner said, and rang off.

"Oh, goody!" cried Daisy. "I'm going, too!"

IT WAS a shocking scene that confronted Daisy and Buckham when they reached the drawbridge. A big, gray, west-bound Public Service bus, jammed with passengers, had swerved from its inside lane into the path of a gasoline truck, and turned over but a few yards short of the bridge control house. In the blast-studded inferno that followed only a few passengers at the front of the bus had been able to climb to safety through the gaping, up-ended front door.

Through the heat-cracked windows of the charred and smouldering wreckage, the two reporters could see the blackened bodies of men, women and children in all the awkward positions of sudden death. Already a rescue crew was at work. An ambulance had arrived and distant sirens signaled the approach of others.

Daisy was suddenly a whirlwind of reportorial efficiency. Pencil and notebook in hand, she was here, there and everywhere. But she was back at Buckham's side when a small man seized his arm. He was a hatless and begrimed small man. His face was scratched and bleeding and the right sleeve of his coat was ripped off, exposing a long, shallow cut from wrist to elbow.

"The driver!" he said. "He's down there."

He flung out his injured arm in the direction of the river. Buckham looked down into the dark waters. The tide was in and it was not far from the floor of the bridge to the water level. A short distance upstream the tug and its barges had stopped in midchannel to wait for the bridge to open. Its lights were reflected crazily in the oily waters and on the foredeck a group of men stood, gesticulating excitedly. They seemed to be pointing to something half way between the tug and the far bank. Buckham and Daisy strained their eyes. Something definitely was threshing about. A searchlight came on from the tug and its white spear glided across the water and came to rest on the spot.

Buckham held his breath in horror.

It was a claw-like, flesh-colored formless, churning thing and the meaty object it held might have been a human body.

As quickly as he saw it, it vanished with its prey beneath the surface. And then there drifted across the water to his ears a low and mournful wailing, so tentative that when it was gone Buckham was unsure whether he had heard anything or was merely sensing a familiar echo from the death cell of John Rogers.

Turning to the man beside him, he found that tall, husky Hap Ladner

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had joined them. And Ladner, his face graven, was still gazing out over the river.

"You saw it, too, Laddie? You heard it?"

Ladner made no reply. A man schooled in the new-day police science which denies even the evidence of the senses unless confirmed by test tube and micrometer, he was unwilling to believe his own eyes and ears.

IT WAS then that Ladner saw Daisy, and nodded—either in recognition or agreement. Her own expression was one of disbelief. The stranger was pawing at Buckham's arm. Buckham looked at him.

"You were in there?" he asked, indicating the bus.

"Yes, I was in there." The man spoke softly. "In the front seat, right behind the driver." He added: "My name's Smallens." And then Buckham noted a curious thing: the little man's eyes were wide and questioning, much as John Rogers' had been.

"That thing—you saw it? Out there?" the little man asked.

Buckham nodded.

"But it was here, you see," the man said, still softly as though he feared someone might overhear him. "Here—climbing up the side of the bridge house, moving up out of the water, and reaching out toward us..."

Ladner spoke sharply.

"What happened? Did the driver lose control?"

"Oh, no—no. I'd been speaking to the driver. I know you aren't supposed to...not when he's driving. But I was. And so I was leaning forward and we both saw it at once. And the driver deliberately steered toward it."

Ladner frowned.

"Steered toward what?"

The man appeared surprised at the question.

"Why," he said, "at what was there, of course."

Ladner looked suspiciously into the man's face. Buckham glanced at Daisy.

"Then—?" prompted Buckham.

"At the first bump, he was thrown out—pulled out or thrown over—over the rail. I don't really know which. Because it was then I got this," he indicated his ripped arm, "and it seemed to me it came in after me. But I don't really know. And then we turned over."

"And when you crawled out—?" asked Buckham.

"It was sliding back into the river."

Ladner said gruffly:

"There's a doctor over there with that ambulance. Better get that arm fixed up."

And when the man had dazedly walked away, Ladner said: "Much good a nut like that will do us."

The last embers were out now and the firemen were removing the bodies. At both ends of the bridge, policemen were re-routing traffic. News photographers were taking flashlight pictures and more reporters were arriving. A light burned in the little bridge house and Buckham glanced in.

"Laddie!" he exclaimed.

The bridge tender, an old, gray-headed man, still sat at the controls, one hand frozen to a switch. His eyes were open and staring—not at the bus wreckage a few yards away, but in the opposite direction out the upstream window.

"Laddie!" Buckham called sharply. "He's dead!"

BUCKHAM did not sleep well when, just before dawn, he finally crawled into bed. He had worked long and hard cleaning up the story and now the last name, age, address

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and circumstance had been phoned in to the city room for the rewriteman to handle. Lying there in the dark, he could visualize the florid headlines. And there would be the body of the story with its who, where, when, why, what and how.

These were the facts. But what were facts? Only anemic words, coined by men to hide their ignorance. He had seen and heard down there in the river something so elemental that no words of man could define it; something that he had not dared even hint of to the caustic-tongued, cynical man who sat in the city editor's chair at the *Eagle*.

"What the hell, Zenas? You losing your grip?"

It was not a question that a man still in his early thirties would like to hear. Good newspaper jobs were scarce, and moreover Buckham had never been the thrifty sort. The same awkward charm which he exercised over women had long proved the undoing of his pocketbook; and, since Daisy entered his life, he was even less affluent. For Daisy, to put it mildly, liked to have money spent on her.

Through the open door he could see, by the soft moonlight that filtered through the window, Daisy curled up on the couch. She had insisted on the couch, though he had offered her the bed. He had a sudden and very accountable desire to go in there and take her in his arms. Something cozy about having a woman around the place, he reflected. He'd half a mind to marry her—which was probably, he thought cynically, what she'd figured on in coming to him.

She slept as peacefully as a kitten, as though what had happened down there on the Hackensack River was just as commonplace as anything else that she ran into every day as a reporter for the opposition paper. Her firm breasts, which looked so well in sweaters and even better, Buckham was now able to observe, in a chiffon nightgown, rose and fell evenly in the measure of young and healthy sleep. But then, Buckham considered, she hadn't followed the John Rogers case—and she hadn't seen John Rogers die. . . .

He had seen John Rogers die. And he'd seen other things. And when he finally dozed off, it was only to dream of tenuous, night-marish creatures wrestling about on the wall of John Rogers' cell. Out of this thrashing and wrestling, the questioning eyes of Rogers glowed...live eyes in the sockets of a corpse...and the corpse suddenly became blackened like the burned bodies he had seen in the bus.

It was nearly noon when a knock on the door started him up from one of these nightmares. It was a copy boy with the envelope of photographs from the *Eagle* art department. He was unwrapping them and Daisy was dressing in the bedroom, when Ladner dropped in.

"My God, Laddie! What's wrong?"

Ladner looked quickly at Buckham.

"Might better ask you," he grunted.

HE CROSSED the room and slumped wearily into a chair beside the window. He had been up all night, but there was more than exhaustion in his expression as he stared moodily out over the Meadows. A thin mist hung low over the two rivers, but the sun was shining and the red and yellow and green culms trapped in the backwaters behind the paint factories shone like jeweled plates.

Daisy came in from the bedroom and Ladner started up, coloring.

"Oh. I didn't mean to intrude."

"Don't be silly!" Daisy grinned. "I'm merely doing a feature story about Zenas—you know, like one of

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those New Yorker profiles. To do it right, I have to follow him around and see what makes him tick. Don't you think Zenas deserves a feature story about himself, Lieutenant?"

Ladner was too tired for banter. He looked at her dully, and she sat down and demurely crossed her hands in her lap. Finally, Ladner said:

"They found the driver."

Buckham misunderstood.

"His body?"

"No, no." Impatiently. "Alive." His nod summoned Buckham to the window. "Off there in the mud flats near that trestle. What would you say it is, a mile upstream from the drawbridge?"

He hesitated, and Buckham waited.

"Naked," Ladner said. "And raving mad."

Still Buckham waited. Ladner turned from the window. He was a big man who played half on the Princeton varsity; one of those college men who, more and more these days, are making police work their careers. His eyes were troubled.

"Shale is his name. I saw him and talked to him. What was the name of the little man who said he deliberately wrecked the bus—?"

"Smallens," said Daisy.

"That's it, Smallens. And Shale admits it. A raving lunatic—but now and again he'd return to his senses and yell: 'I did it on purpose! I had to.' And he said he had to save people from it. He said he was trying to smash it."

"It?" queried Buckham.

Ladner fixed Buckham with his stare. And each was remembering the man Smallens' answer to the same question when put by Ladner the night before: "At what was there, of course."

"He made four round trips a day from Newark to Times Square. And every trip for eight days, he said, he'd seen that thing in the river. He said that he heard crazy sounds. And then, he said, when he saw it coiled around the bridge house he knew he must destroy it."

"And thirty-eight people were killed in the process," Buckham grunted. Ladner did not seem to hear.

"Just as Smallens said, Shale claims he was thrown out of the bus and over the rail. But something leaped up and caught him and dragged him down into the river. And it swam with him under the surface and sometimes on the surface. It was hot and stinking and it burned his skin, he said."

This, from a stolid lieutenant of the State Police, was an amazing story.

"And what do the others think at your barracks?" Buckham asked.

"That he's gone off his nut, of course, which as I've said he has. But you can imagine they're somewhat surprised at *this*."

LIEUTENANT Ladner took an envelope from his pocket and from the envelope he drew out an official State Police photograph. It was a revolting picture of a wild-eyed, naked man. Legs, thighs, rump, back, chest and arms were striped with long, narrow welts.

"Heavens!" cried Daisy. "It's as if he'd been lashed with a cat o' nine tails!"

Buckham looked at the picture thoughtfully, then with growing resentment.

"Dammit, Laddie! Why come to me with this?"

"Because," said Ladner slowly, "you're supposed to know more about the Meadows than anyone else—and maybe what lives there."

Buckham's laugh was short, ugly and slightly hysterical.

"You and John Rogers!" he grunt-

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ed. You wouldn't believe what I'd have to say, anyway." He spoke fiercely, giving way to a sudden, vicious desire to injure his friend. "Even your eyes are like John Rogers' this morning," he said.

Daisy stared at him. She had never seen Buckham in such a mood. Ladner turned wonderingly to a mirror. Then, still looking into the mirror, he said quietly:

"And have you seen your own, Zenas?"

Buckham felt ashamed.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. I don't need to look at myself. I can feel it."

For a moment, both men looked at each other. And each knew that he was confronted by something so deadly that it would be suicide to fight it alone.

"Of course," said Ladner without much conviction, "it could be an octopus."

Buckham's negative was quick and emphatic.

"*Nothing* lives in those waters—*you* know that."

"Because of the waste from the factories?" asked Daisy.

"Yes. And besides, the cephalopoda are strictly salt water." He unwrapped his own envelope of pictures. "But *this* could have done it," he said, and whipped out an eight-by-ten enlargement.

Ladner's already large eyes bulged, and Daisy—for once giving way to a feminine emotion—recoiled and averted her head.

"Holy Moses! What's that?"

Buckham tapped the picture with his forefinger.

"Roger's version of what he saw," he replied slowly, "chalked on his cell wall. But he wasn't satisfied with this. He wanted a name for it—a definition—'Will you try to find it?' he asked me...as if putting a word on something would help."

He uttered that last comment with contempt, then glanced at the picture again.

"Of course," he continued, "when we speak of the cephalopoda we mean the hundred and fifty-odd salt-water genera we know of today. But the extinct forms of Palaeozoic and Mesozoic times greatly outnumbered the living, and God only knows what shapes some of them took or what waters they lived in or how they fed and reproduced and grew. There was one big fellow, the Ammonite, with a shell five feet across..."

Ladner was incredulous.

"But good heavens, man! For something from millions of years back to wander into these times...it wouldn't be natural."

Buckham's smile was thin.

"Ah, I warned that you wouldn't believe what I'd have to say. And yet, here's evidence—John Rogers' last testament. Tell me, you two. Isn't there some semblance between this and what we saw last night?"

RELUCTANTLY, Ladner re-studied the photo. Only with effort did Daisy give it a second glance.

"It was so damn quick," Ladner complained.

"I wasn't sure what I saw," Daisy murmured.

"But yes...this tentacle's something like. Good Lord! The man who drew that was inspired!"

"He was an artist," Buckham said simply. Then he returned to his former thought:

"Yet it's more than the cephalopoda we have to deal with. A man can look at an octopus or a squid and not lose his senses. But here—don't you see, Laddie? There's a confounded purpose about the thing. It's in the suggestion of movement. There's intelligence—blind intelligence, perhaps, but

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fiendish and elemental. The kind that reaches out and fastens its terrible knowledge on a man against his will, revealing such horrors we've never dreamed of. Rogers felt its infection and killed his family to protect them from it. And Shale, a less sensitive man, felt it and took direct action against the thing itself—and went insane."

He started to reach for a book from a shelf and was suddenly attracted by a new and more alarming look in Ladner's expression. A weakness, he wondered?

"Of course," he said judiciously, quietly, "people of strong wills—like you and like you, Daisy, and like myself—are better equipped to resist. And also, we're forearmed because we are forewarned. Perhaps the whole tragedy of Rogers and Shale was the element of surprise. And the surprise stemmed from ignorance of it."

He had the book in his hands now and was thumbing through the pages.

"And what is it?" he asked, as he stopped at a passage. "I wonder if old Tom Blake didn't have some hint. You remember how he claimed he wrote his Prophetic Books from the dictation of spirits—often, even, against his will? Perhaps it was so, for what mortal imagination could conjure up such a picture of the Creation as this?

"'The shapes, screaming, fluttered vain;
Some combined into muscles and glands,
Some organs for craving and lust.
Most remained on the tormented void—
Urizen's army of horrors.'"

Buckham stepped to the window and again looked out across the Meadows where a yellow smog had now settled over marsh and factory and stream.

He said abruptly:

"And what else was Blake's 'tormented void' but the chaos from which the old religions tell us that Cosmos was ordered? But the real question has to do with the shapes that were forced to remain out there in the void when the door of Cosmos closed against them. What else were they but soul-less half-matter, left-over refuse, unable to fit into an orderly world of muscle and bone and cell and gland?"

"You're almost beyond my depth," Ladner said.

"And mine, too, Laddie. But look out there! Look out at those great smelters and refineries and furnaces and crucibles! We've cut open the very guts of the world to feed them with oil and ore. We've changed the eternal elements and broken the atom itself. And what the machines don't consume, we toss off as waste to befoul the sea and the air. Then—couldn't it be, Laddie, that somehow in the process we've smashed down the door and recreated the old conditions so that these screaming shapes can come through again and feed and thrive?"

A strong man, Ladner, whose great physique was balanced with a level head. But Buckham and Daisy saw him shudder.

And Daisy was seeing a new side to Buckham's character. And now Buckham turned back from the book of old Tom Blake to the photographic enlargement of John Rogers' cell wall.

"D'ya read music, either of you?" he asked, pointing to the half dozen written measures below the drawing.

Daisy shook her head.

"I've never been one for that," said Ladner.

"Then listen—"

Softly at first, then a little louder, Buckham hummed the notes. Ladner

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leaped across the room and tore the picture from him.

"My God, man, stop that!"

IT WAS THAT evening that the trek out of the Meadows began; at first so imperceptibly that even the observant Buckham, driving from one police station to another in the towns that surrounded the Meadows, saw nothing unusual in the night life of the factories.

By the next day whole departments were shut down and whispers of spreading strikes reached the city desks. And that made little sense. For many diverse factories were involved, and many diverse skills, and many unions.

Labor writers—noting that the big Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines Corporation was alone unaffected—wrote knowingly of mass ennui, a languor of spirits which they said could be as contagious as a bodily disease. But the close-mouthed workers, interviewed in their homes by the management men, gave no reason for their refusal to work. And soon even the management men themselves were leaving the Meadows.

Buckham, returning to his rooms from John Rogers' funeral at Montclair, found Daisy dressing to go out. Her city editor, she said, had told her to get onto the story.

"Down there? I won't let you," Buckham said.

Daisy bridled.

"It's an assignment," she said, "and I'm as much a reporter as you."

Buckham was caustic.

"I admire your devotion to duty, my dear—and I still forbid it."

She took a step toward him and put her arms around his neck and tilted her mouth up.

"And if I do—?"

"You'll lose your happy home."

"Then I'll sleep at someone else's."

"Daisy!"

His appearance of shock was deceptive. He was actually thinking of Rogers' funeral. There'd been only a few witnesses—a dozen or so of the morbidly curious who turn out for such occasions. And the undertaker. And his professional pallbearers. The latter somehow had mishandled the cheap wooden casket which the State Prison provided, and it plunged down into the grave, breaking open. And the head had popped out and Buckham was chilled to see one of John Rogers' sewn eyes...open and staring!

Daisy's pert face was very close. Was there that same look in her eyes, too? He felt suddenly sick, as if his intestines had knotted. His arms went around her and he held her tightly. His mouth lowered to the smooth skin of her throat and he kissed her and he talked to her in a husky whisper.

"I want you so much," he said. "I never knew how much I loved you. I can't lose you now. We'll go down—now—and get in the car...and drive as far away as we can."

Just as once before when this impulse was upon him, he knew that flight was not the answer. And so he made no further protest when Daisy said:

"Don't you understand, Bucky? I've *got* to find out what's there! And so do you. As long as we lived, this thing would hang onto our minds. And if you're right, honey—"

They left it at this: she could tour the factories, but only the factories, in her convertible. She was not to leave the main roads. And they'd meet at nine o'clock at the Glass Inn, that tiny, shack-like roadhouse on Communipaw Avenue near the Hackensack.

DAISY HAD no sooner left than Buckham was called into the office to take over the night city desk.

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Two men had phoned in sick and two others were on out-of-town assignments. For a paper as understaffed as the *Eagle*, this was near-tragedy. Buckham could cover his own beat by phone, but he knew he could expect no help from the telegraph editor or his copyreader in an emergency. Young Fowler, the only reporter, would have to hold down Police Headquarters and try to cover the town from there. That left only Hanley, the photog, who was already late in getting in, and Beals, the lone rewriteman, who was already in the process of getting drunk.

Resentful, worried, nervous, Buckham rolled up his sleeves and waded into the copy left over from the day side. But he'd no more than begun when the phone rang. It was Fowler:

"Zenas? Did you know the bridge tenders are pulling out?"

Buckham tried to keep his voice even.

"How d'ya know?"

"The police teletype. They've left the bridges unmanned. Kearny firemen are down there but they don't know how to operate them. Is your window open? Can you hear the ships' whistles?"

"Wait—"

Buckham went to the window and raised it. It was a fine fall night and he could see, between two buildings, far off toward the Meadows where a necklace of lights marked the Skyway. As he listened, he could hear the impatient wailing of ships' whistles signalling vainly for the bridges to open along the lower reaches of the two rivers.

He returned to the phone.

"Try calling around to get the details," he ordered. And he started in once more on the pile of copy. But a few minutes later the AP state wire teletype beside the desk rang five urgent bells for "bulletin."

"Bayonne, N.J., Oct. 21—(AP)—"

The black typed lines in cap letters flowed rhythmically as Buckham read.

"The U. S. Coast Guard station here tonight at 7.18 picked up a frantic radio message from the White Line freighter Paterson which said the ship is trapped between two closed bridges in the lower Passaic. Lt. Cmdr. James Warren said communication broke off after the Paterson's operator radioed: 'For God's sake...crew jumping overboard...' Efforts to restore radio contact with the Paterson failed. The cutter Sark was dispatched to the scene."

Buckham's heart skipped a beat. He glanced at the Western Union clock on the wall. With a start, he saw that it was already 8 o'clock. His date with Daisy was for nine. Out of the question, of course; had been all along. He telephoned the Glass Inn and asked for Willie the bartender. A girlish giggle answered instead:

"Who? Willie Baines?" (Giggle) "Will doesn't live here any more." (Giggle) "Will's gone off on a toot. Why don'tcha come on down, big boy? Free liquor. We're (hic) drinking it all up. Better hurry."

Buckham spoke slowly, precisely.

"Please," he insisted. "When Daisy Lovell arrives, will you tell her that Buckham..." He spelled it out: "B-for-boy, U-for-Ulysses, C-for-Charles ...can't meet her. Tell her to call me at the *Newark Eagle*."

HE WAS sweating when he hung up. He wasn't sure he'd put his message across. He'd call again—at nine on the dot. Perhaps by then...

The teletype started up again:

"Add Bayonne...

"The Coast Guard cutter Sark at 7.45 radioed it was unable to reach the Paterson because of an unmanned, closed bridge. A Coast Guard helicopter has been sent to investigate..."

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Buckham thought: at least he could count on AP to cover the bridge story. He turned back to the copy on his desk, laboring to concentrate. Court story. Commission meeting. Sheriff's detective appointed. East Orange girl killed by hit-runner. Millburn Kiwanis Club to hold benefit dance.

Again the sharp five bells from the AP machine:

"Jersey City, Oct. 21 — (AP) — Motorists arriving at the west tollgate of the Holland Vehicular Tunnel from the Jersey City-Newark Turnpike reported tonight seeing a number of automobiles and trucks wrecked in ditches along the route. Most of the accidents, they told Port Authority tunnel police, were in the vicinity of the junction between that turnpike and the Belleville Turnpike in the North Jersey Meadows. They said they saw no sign of the drivers. Word was relayed to State Police who are investigating..."

Then:

"Second add bulletin Bayonne—

"At 8.05 Lt. Craig Bering, pilot of the Coast Guard helicopter, reported he was hovering low over the freighter Paterson. Lt. Cmdr. Warren said that Lt. Paterson reported by plane-ground radio that the ship was ablaze with lights but that none of the crew was visible.

"There was no deck space available for a landing and the helicopter hovered about 25 feet above the freighter's masts. Lt. Bering reported a curious movement in the water in the vicinity of the freighter although farther away the surface of the river was calm. Small craft which can sail under the closed bridge are being dispatched from nearby Elizabethport."

BUCKHAM looked dazedly about the small, dingy city room. The telegraph editor and his copyreader were still wrangling with the night wire reports from the world's capitals. Beals, having sneaked out for a quickie, was walking unsteadily from the door toward his desk. Hanley, the photographer, had finally breezed in, a stogie sticking jauntily from his mouth.

"Look, fellows—Beals, for God's sake! Hell's breaking loose out there in the Meadows. Get out there fast! Here! Pick up Fowler, too, over at Police Headquarters."

As they went out, he called after them:

"Listen! If you run into Daisy Lovell of the *News*, ask her to call me."

He sat at his desk for a few minutes staring at the pile of copy. Suddenly he swore:

"On a night like this—tripe!" And he pushed the copy from him.

It was then that the phones began ringing.

People. People from everywhere: from East Orange, West Orange, South Orange, from Kearny, Arlington, Harrison, Hackensack, Secaucus, Hoboken, Union City.

"Is this the city editor? We heard..."

"Look, mister, the radio says..."

"What's that strange light I see from my window..?"

Asking the operator in the business office to screen the calls, Buckham walked into the editor's office and switched on the radio. A breathless male voice came up:

"This is your latest five minute round-up of the news, brought to you through the courtesy of...

"Flash! New York. The Pennsylvania Railroad has just reported that its lift bridge on its main line over the Hackensack River has jammed. One report says that the bridge tender left it in an elevated position and disappeared. Trains from the south and

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west are piling up one behind the other in the Jersey Meadows on the west side of the bridge and south and westbound trains from Pennsylvania Station are blocked at the east end of the bridge. . ."

Buckham went back to the teletype.

"Lead all Meadows.

"New York, Oct. 21 — (AP) — Thousands of railroad passengers, many automobiles and several steamships are stranded in the Jersey Meadows tonight in what appeared from all reports to be a series of strange coincidents affecting travel by rail, highway and water. Several persons are reported dead or missing.

"All factories in the area have closed, except one: the Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines plant. The mechanical bridges are inoperative. Hudson & Manhattan tube trains from Newark to Journal Square have halted, and a three-way investigation into the mysterious circumstances has been launched by State Police, the Coast Guard and local firemen. Road blocks are being set up. . ."

NINE O'CLOCK. Buckham called the Glass Inn again. This time there was no answer. He phoned the Harrison State Police Barracks.

"Laddie?"

Ladner had just come in, was just leaving again.

"Zenas! I thought you'd be down here."

There was something in Ladner's tone, some tension, that Buckham did not like.

"I'm stuck in the office," he explained, "alone. Listen, Laddie! Daisy's down there somewhere. We were going to meet at the Glass Inn but I can't reach her there. There's no answer at all."

"The Glass Inn? My God, man! It's on fire."

"Laddie!"

Again Buckham's stomach knotted. Ladner was talking. There was that odd quality to his voice.

"Was anybody hurt, Laddie?"

"No—nobody."

Buckham was suddenly suspicious.

"Have you seen—?"

"It?" Ladner finished. "Them," he said flatly.

It was a moment before Buckham comprehended the full horror of this. Then he said, urgently:

"But you can find her. Get her out of there. Please, Laddie. She's driving a yellow convertible. Easy to spot, Laddie. Easy."

"I don't know, Zenas. There's so much. So many things."

His voice sounded very tired, apathetic, much as John Rogers' voice had sounded.

"But you've got your troopers. They're out there, aren't they? Can't you radio them?"

"I don't know, Ladner repeated. "They go out and they don't come back and we don't hear from them. I'll do what I can."

Turning miserably from the phone, Buckham had a desire to chuck the paper and rush down into the Meadows himself. At least he would be doing somethng, trying to find her—not sitting here, helpless, while the thing piled up.

Reason fought back. He was alone on the city side. Copy was now coming in over the AP state wire in a steady flow. It had to be edited, headed, set in type. The paper had to come out. And what could he do down there? Where would he look?

Old Hendlin, the telegraph editor, looked up from his corner at the other side of the room. His spectacled eyes peered out from under his green eyeshade.

"Big story breaking, Zenas?" he inquired mildly.

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Buckham nearly choked. Where had the man been the last three hours? Buried in his lunatic reports from Washington and London and Paris and Moscow while the biggest story since the Creation was breaking next door!

But the very irony of the question served to steady Buckham's nerves; to give him a sense of perspective.

"Quite big, Henry," he replied quietly. "Our top story, Henny."

IT WAS THEN that the hopeful thought came to him: perhaps what happened to John Rogers and to Shale, the bus driver, and to the bridge tenders and the factory workers and the crew of the freighter Paterson—and was still happening to whomever was down there now—happened because they could not conceive of such a thing. Perhaps it was the fright and surprise of materialistic people when confronted with elemental phenomena.

Perhaps for Daisy and Ladner and himself, who had at least developed a hypothesis on which to work, the danger might not be so great. Perhaps Daisy and Ladner down there could look and keep on looking upon the thing and not succumb to the urge to destroy themselves as Rogers and Shale and the Paterson's crewmen had...

Still, was there not a breaking point; was there not a limit to resistance?

And it was growing. Ladner had used the word "them". And every report from the Meadows showed how it spread. He traced it on the big wall map of North Jersey. Rogers had first seen it in the Hackensack from the Skyway. The site of the bus crash was half a mile downstream from that. From there to where the Paterson lay in the Passaic River was nearly a mile to the west. And from there to where the trains were stalled and the cars were ditched was nearly two miles.

And then Buckham had another hopeful thought. He had suggested to Daisy and Ladner that it was the poisonous wastes of the factories that nourished the horror. Was it not reasonable to suppose, now that the factories were closed, that the tides coming in and flowing out would carry the wastes into the sea? And that the fresh water flowing down from the watersheds would cleanse out the channels? And would not starvation then set in?

But how long would that take? Surely, there must be something that scientific man could do faster than nature.

The phone rang. It was Beals calling from a service station on the edge of the Meadows. Buckham started to put on his head set to take the story. Beals screamed through:

"It's awful, Zenas! Godawful! I can't describe it, Zenas!"

Click.

Buckham swore, and went again into the editor's office and this time he brought out the table radio and plugged it in on his desk. Listening, he tried to work at the same time.

"We are here in the heart of the Jersey Meadows, folks, in our two-way short-wave radio relay truck. We are parked on Belleville Turnpike across a wide stretch of Meadows from the main passenger line of the Pennsylvania Railroad. What we see is unimaginable.

"The long, red Pennsy trains are lined up one behind the other on both tracks on both sides of the Hackensack River. The bridge is jammed. The trains are lighted. But they are empty.

"They are empty because the people have fled from them—attracted by something heaven only knows what. Or running from something. They have fled into the marshes by the hundreds. Parked beside us are three floodlight

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trucks from the fire departments of Kearny and Jersey City. The lights are turned onto the marshland and we can see in the glare of light the people struggling toward us, trying to reach the road.

"There are men and women and babies in arms. The marsh grass is hip-high and we can see only the waists and shoulders and heads of the people. Some stumble and fall. Some seem to be pulled down. They try to struggle up. Some seem to be knocked down by something from behind them.

"A woman goes down. A woman in a red hat. She does not come up again. The man beside her does not even give her a look. He struggles on. And now he's down. We can see the terror of the faces of the people but we cannot see what is in the grass.

"A dozen firemen have just left the road and are running out to meet the people. They had almost reached them. But now they have stopped. They are beating at something in the grass.

"There is a vacant patch of grass off to the left where there are no people. The grass is rustling. It is not the breeze. The grass is rustling only in one place. It is as if something were crawling through the grass..."

AGAIN THE phone rang. His hand trembling, Buckham answered.

"Cy Moberly speaking from Irvington. State Police made a little numbers raid up here just now. Let me have a rewriteman."

Buckham fought to control his anger. Then:

"How in hell," he demanded, "can the State Troopers find the men or the time to make a fool raid like that on a night like this?"

He slammed the phone down, then sat back, breathless, his thoughts chaotic.

"Daisy," he whispered.

The vibration of the linotypes on the floor below brought him to his senses. It was midnight now. Nearing edition time. Somehow he managed to write a general lead and patch on the AP copy. Actually it said little enough. There was a *when*, a *where*, a *who*—but no *what, why* or *how*.

Slowly, then, like dawn, the answer came to him. It crept into his thoughts, elusive at first, hardly discernible, almost escaping, then returning in greater force. It was born of a lone word uttered by Cy Moberly over the phone—and the word was *numbers*.

Swiftly he glanced through the AP copy to re-read a remembered paragraph.

"All factories in the area have closed, except one: the Underwood-Rand Calculating Machines plant."

He tossed the copy over to Hendlin. He thought: why should it be an exception?

There was only one answer. Whatever was out there had the devil's own fear of numbers.

Yes, that kept it at a distance. But to do the job right, to wade in against the thing, wouldn't there have to be form and order to the numbers? He reached for the phone and again called the Harrison Barracks. Ladner had just returned from a long tour of the Meadows. His voice sounded more tired than ever, more hopeless.

"I couldn't find her," he said.

"Laddie!" Buckham shouted. "I've got it, Laddie. I've got the answer. Please don't laugh at me, Laddie... it's numbers!"

"You aren't talking sense, Zenas."

"Yes I am. If it's what we think is down there—out of chaos, out of the void. Remember, Laddie?"

"Y-e-s," Ladner replied slowly, "I remember."

"And aren't form and numbers the enemy of chaos? Man, man! They're the highest achievement of the scien-

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tific mind. Why *can't* they beat back the screaming shapes?"

"You're crazy."

"But we can try it, Laddie! We can try it! Stay there! Stay till I come. Half an hour, an hour. Please, Laddie."

"An hour? Good God!"

"Then drive over here for me. Please, Laddie. I'll try to be ready."

Again Buckham went into the editor's office. And this time he pulled out Volume 14, Libi to Mary, of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. It was a subject with which he had once been familiar—Magic Squares.

HERE WAS purity of form; here was order. For the numbers in each square were arranged so that every column, every row, each of the two diagonals added up to a constant sum.

In the after time, Buckham would never know what influence if any he and his ideas had on the happenings of this mad night in the Jersey Meadows. He would never be able to conceive of such horrors. For when he would try to remember, he would not be able to recall what it was that he wished to remember. There were never to be again before him the haunting eyes of John Rogers, the reaching fingers. There would be an abyss, a darkness of the mind about these fine October days. And when he would try to discuss it with others, fumbling, hunting for words, they would look at him with surprise. Until the time would come when he would not speak of it at all.

The radio reports of this night—ethereal, no sooner spoken than lost in the void—might well have been forgotten by the world as only another Wellesian invasion from Mars...had it not been for the headlines in the newspapers. And these, with screaming caution and double talk, left much unsaid. One shouted:

Scores Die in Jersey Meadows
as Hysteria Grips Passengers

And scores did die, and their bodies were recovered, and they were buried under tombstones with their names on the tombstones.

A tabloid shrieked its pseudo-science:

Mass Phobia Blamed
for Night of Terror

Conventional newspapers like the *Times* discussed "the sequel of coincidence." They explained away the welts on the bodies of the dead by pointing to the thorny growth that grew in the marshes. But, like Buckham in his own general lead, they could give their readers—after all—only the hard, factual crust of when, where and who—and scarcely the merest suggestions of what, why and how. Which is hardly strange when it is considered that the reporters of these other papers, like Buckham's reporters, chose this night to get drunk.

But Buckham, there in the editor's office, typing out the numerical squares— Nasiks and Semi-Nasiks, De La Hire's Constructions, and De la Loubere's, and Agrippa's of the orders of 3, 4 and 5—had thought for only one thing in the present: the pert, saucy face of Daisy. He typed the squares in eight-carbon lots, eight to a sheet—a pains-taking, nerve-wracking task, for the slightest error would destroy their worth. And then he cut up the sheets with his shears, and stuffed the hundreds of squares into his pockets.

LADNER WAS not himself. He was sullen and cowed. He'd seen his best troopers that night go into the Meadows on orders and fail to report.

"Take some of these," Buckham urged, pressing a handful of the paper squares towards him as he drove. But

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Ladner refused to take his hands from the wheel of his big police car.

"Silly business," he muttered. "I'd as soon ditch the whole thing."

"And leave Daisy out there?"

Ladner did not reply.

"Laddie." Buckham's voice was soft. "It's what we know that counts. We're not like those others who go crazy because they don't understand. In a way, it's because we have some slight comprehension that we're immune."

"Are we?"

The sharp retort stung and Buckham fell silent.

It was dark along the Newark Turnpike. Here and there they found a car in the ditch, and no driver nearby. Ladner kept his fists gripped to the wheel, his eyes straight ahead as if fearing to look off into the marshland. But Buckham's gaze wandered incessantly, seeking a yellow convertible.

South the great lighted Skyway hung suspended against the star-studded heavens. Across the length of the Meadows rose the steel towers of the electric power lines, like gaunt marching giants. To the north, as they neared the junction with the Belleville Turnpike, they could see the glow of the floodlamps on the marshes where the long red trains were stalled. She would not be up there, Buckham thought. She had promised to stay in the zone of the factories.

As they neared the Hackensack, they turned into Fish House Road, drove through the railway underpass and followed the west bank of the river. Suddenly Buckham sat forward and peered through the windshield.

Through a small grove of trees, ahead and off the road to the right, he thought he saw a glint of something yellow.

"Slow, Laddie, slow."

Beyond the screen of trees they came to a narrow causeway—a rutted lane scarcely the width of a truck, that took off from the highway at a right angle. It was an old road, built high above the marshes, and had once led to a brick yard; and it could now, Buckham remembered, be used as a shortcut to reach one of the Public Service power plants a mile beyond.

Swinging the right spotlight up the causeway, Buckham gasped. The yellow glint that he'd seen was the upended rear of the convertible, its nose buried bank-down in the marshy grass and its seat... empty.

But there was more there than that—much more. They swarmed over the wrecked car and over the causeway and along the banks on both sides of the causeway, moving undulously in and out of the marsh. Even as he stared, Buckham felt the police car lurch and turn. Ladner, eyes glazed, was wrenching the wheel to the right and stepping on the accelerator, purpose in every muscle of his face. Purpose to destroy.

"Stop, dammit, Laddie!"

In a single swift movement Buckham reached to the switch, snapped off the ignition and threw the keys out of the car.

Ladner glared at him. But Buckham's eyes were again on the causeway. Swinging the spot into a position so that it held to the narrow road, he opened the door and stepped to the ground.

Was she...? Could she...?

A DOZEN YARDS beyond the ditched convertible, the old road crossed a canal by a narrow, wooden bridge. And there on the bridge, pinned by the glare of the spotlight, stood Daisy, her blonde hair streaming, her coat gone, her silk waist shredded and exposing her white breasts, her slim body turning, twisting, pirouetting in what seemed like a fantastic and diabolical dance; while

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in the penumbra of the light the shapes moved relentlessly about her.

Wrecked in what only could have been the same siren pursuit which had drawn others to their death, she had leaped from the car and fled along the road only to be trapped. And now two sounds reached Buckham's ears in concert. And one was the same metallic wailing that he had heard across the waters from the drawbridge where the bus had burned. And the other, more faintly, was Daisy's soft voice.

There was a rhythm to her voice, as if she were reciting a litany; as if she were a priestess calling upon the outward gods to destroy her enemies. But the voice was weak now, faltering, and when she paused for breath or stopped in her gyrations, the shapes darted in toward her. And it came to Buckham then that in her desperation she had struck upon the same numerical exorcism that had occurred to him. But she, poor child, could use only the frail human voice in her desperate effort to drive them back a little way toward the void. And when her voice would at last fail...

"Coming, dear! C o m i n g!" he shouted. And, reaching into his pockets for a fistful of squares, he started cautiously forward along the causeway holding his hands out before him.

He had not reckoned with Ladner. The lieutenant, crazed by compulsion, had walked around the car from the left and was standing, feet spread apart, staring at the mass of reptile-like movement. Slowly he drew his service revolver and began to fire. One. Two. Three. The reports blasted on Buckham's eardrums. Four!

"Laddie, for God's sake!"

Five.

For a moment the tall, handsome trooper stood stiffly, the wild light of John Rogers in his eyes. Then, too quickly for Buckham to move, he raised the gun, pressed the muzzle to his temple and with the last bullet shot out his brains.

For an awful moment, Buckham stood galvanized. Then again the faint cry came to him from the bridge. Turning, he pushed forward along the causeway. And as he advanced, the shapes slunk before him, sliding in retreat down the banks into the marsh grass.

He was not ten feet from her when, slowly as if she were melting to the ground, Daisy collapsed. And the obscene things began their final onslaught.

He reached her barely in time. And his touch on her skin was like a magic balm. The mystic squares fluttered to the ground, encircling them, forming a barrier from which the shapes shrank, fading back into the darkness.

Daisy stirred in his arms.

"Bucky... I held on... I knew you'd come."

He gathered her closer to him.

"You're all right now, darling," he whispered. "Hang on tight—forever. Tomorrow..."

AND TOMORROW?

He sat on the edge of the bed —their bed—and held her hand. The color was returning to her face. She smiled up at him.

"I had the most dreadful dream," she murmured. "I was driving and I ran into a ditch and..."

Her face clouded.

"Funny," she said, "how you can't always remember what happened in a dream."

He got up and stood by the window, looking down into the hotel parking lot. A yellow convertible, both front fenders crumpled, was parked where it had been delivered by a wrecker.

"I'm afraid," he said quietly, "that it wasn't quite all a dream."

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He, too, was trying to remember. He reached for a newspaper that lay on the bureau and again read the headline to himself:

Trooper Killed by Own Gun
While Saving Girl Reporter
After She Drives Off Road

His own name leaped out at him from the story:

"Zenas Buckham, *Newark Eagle* police reporter, said he was starting for the wrecked car when he heard shots and turned to find Ladner with the gun in his hand. Buckham, who is Miss Lovell's fiance, said he did not know what Ladner was shooting at. Detectives believe that he may have stumbled on the rough ground and that the gun twisted in his hand, discharging the fatal bullet. Powder marks revealed that the shot was from a very close range."

No, Buckham didn't remember making any statement. It was possible, of course. But what happened then? Hadn't he returned to the office? Hadn't he sat at his typewriter a long time? Numbers were whirling through his head, but what did they mean?

There was another, larger headline in the paper:

JERSEY MEADOWS NORMAL AFTER NIGHT OF TERROR; WORKERS RETURN TO JOBS

And far down in the story:

"A minor note of mystery was added by Hank Parker, Newark air taxi pilot, who reported that early today a tall, red-headed man who appeared very excited hired him to fly low over the Meadows for half an hour. When they were over the area, the stranger tossed out large quantities of small pieces of paper. This happened a number of times.

" 'You meet all kinds of queer fish in this business,' Parker said. 'Some advertising or publicity stunt, I suppose. I didn't ask him and he didn't tell me. He paid me my fare, so what the hell?' "

Yes, Buckham thought, there was something familiar about that—and what the hell? He looked at Daisy. She smiled. He leaned down and pressed himself against her and kissed her. They looked into each other's eyes. And what he saw in hers made him shut his own eyes tightly. He would have to be very good to her, he thought.

THE END

THE LONG AND THE SHORT

★ By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT ★

IT'S A FUNNY THING but nothing in this world is exact. You can't pin anything down—not even in the sciences. In fact *above all*, not even in the sciences. Take physics for an example. If there is any branch of human knowledge that you would be inclined to call exact, that's the one. Yet, contrariwise, it is the science really of inexactitude because it never does anything without considering error.

Consider something as simple as taking a measurement of length. Most people would say that this is the easiest thing in the world. You apply the yardstick or whatever and make a reading. Uh-uh, that's not it at all.

Suppose you want to measure the length of a board and you want to know it pretty accurately. You've got to do a number of things. In the first place, the only way you can manage to get a reasonably accurate measurement of the length is to take a "set" of readings, maybe a dozen or more—the more the merrier. Then you average these, and *that* average is the most probable answer! If you want to know just what chance you stand of hitting the correct length closely you figure out the "deviations," the differences between each measurement and the average. Then you know exactly how wrong you can be.

This holds for any kind of a measurement. Is it any wonder that statistics is the backbone of modern science? A great deal of knowledge comes from a statistical consideration. The relationship between a crap game with its chances, and a scientific measurement is mighty close.

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Hepcats of Venus

By RANDALL GARRETT

Illustrator FINLAY

A Galactic Observer is supposed to be all-knowing. But even the sharpest G.O. can hardly be faulted for being puzzled by the phenomenon of a jive trio in a beatnik hangout—especially when the instruments they play on are built-in!

"THAT'S very odd," said Lady Curvert.

The sound that accompanied her voice was that of her egg spoon taking the top off her egg in its cup, so it is not remarkable that Lord Curvert, without lowering his copy of the *Times*, merely inquired: "Something wrong with the egg, my dear?"

"What? Egg? No, silly; it's this night club in New York."

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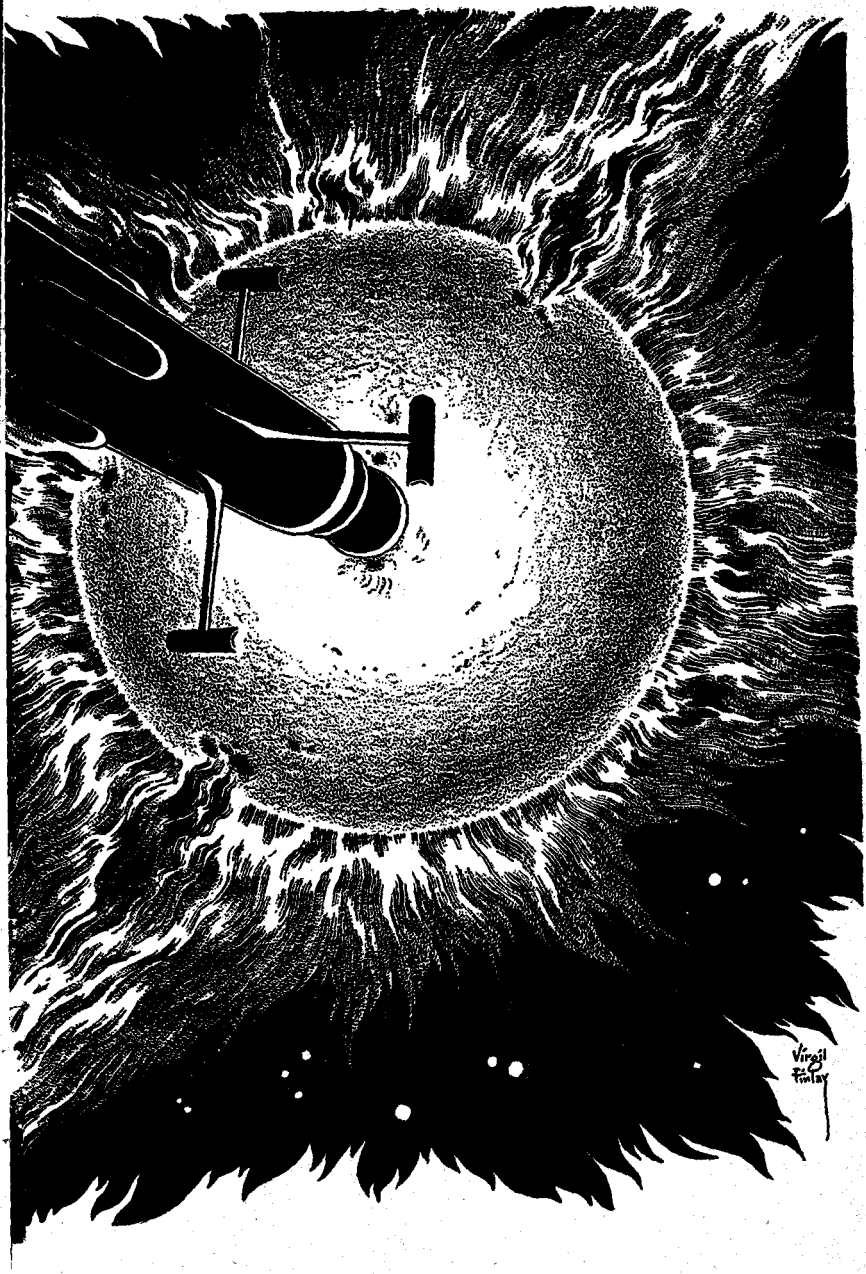

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Lord Curvert, well aware that his wife never remarked on anything of that sort without good reason, reluctantly lowered his newspaper and looked at her. She was absently spooning up egg with her right hand while her left held the tabloid upon which her gaze was fastened.

"What is it, Evelyn?" his lordship asked. "Something?"

"I'm not certain," she said. "Listen to this: 'The Village's newest and farthest-out *espresso*-teria, the *Venus Club*, is the latest subject of a quiet investigation by the Musician's Union, according to the B'way scuttlebutt. Seems that the weirdly-dressed musicos who are pulling in the jazz-lovers by the horde are too good to be believed. The management claims they're unpaid amateurs and don't need a union card, but the big-name pros who've heard them don't believe any amateur group could be that good. The "Venusian" get-ups they wear, which make them look as though the instruments they play are part of their bodies, make the players unrecognizable, and Union officials can't find out who they are. Since a combo as good as the "Venusians" could get hi-pay spots easily, according to Union officials, it doesn't make sense for them to keep on at the *Venus Club* unless they actually are getting something under the counter. If they are the Union wants its cut.'" Lady Curvert looked up at her husband through glorious deep blue eyes. "Isn't that odd?"

His lordship blinked thoughtfully. "Odd, yes," he said after a moment, "but hardly world-shattering. I scarcely see how it concerns us."

Lady Curvert tapped the paper. "Venusians."

LORD CURVERT elevated an eyebrow a fraction of a millimeter. "My dear old girl," he said in a voice tinged with sarcasm, "the last time I was on Venus, back in 1948, nothing on that vast overheated Turkish bath had evolved any higher than the sponges. I hardly think that the succeeding fifteen years could have produced the intelligence required to beat out a hot rhythm on a set of bongo drums in a beatnik coffee house—though that is admittedly not such a tremendous leap in intelligence."

"I'm quite aware of that, Charles," his wife said coolly. "It's merely that this article has apparently started an intuitive chain-web in my mind. Something will come of it, I'm sure."

"Ah, I see." Lord Curvert was well aware of his wife's mental abilities. "Very well, my dear; when you've formed a full intuition, let me know. Meantime, I'll have some more kippers."

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Lord Curvert finished the kippers, the *Times*, and the coffee, excused himself, and headed toward the library, leaving his wife to continue her reading. She had already finished the American papers and had begun on *Pravda*. Within an hour, she would have all the salient points of the day's news filed away in her capacious and accurate memory, where her subconscious could get at them in its ceaseless work of forming the "hunches" that made Evelyn Curvert so useful in her position as Assistant to the Galactic Observer.

Fesswick, the butler,—tall, broadshouldered, a pluperfectly correct expression on his very human-looking face—was waiting for his lordship in the library.

"Good morning, Fesswick. Anything interesting this morning?"

"Very little, my lord," said Fesswick in his precise voice. "The instrument readings are normal. The Russians attempted to launch another of their new rockets at 0517 this morning. It exploded at 0521."

"They won't publish this failure, either," said Lord Curvert.

"Very likely not, my lord," said Fesswick. "According to the neutrino emission detectors, the new reactor at Tel-Aviv suffered a slight misfunction at 1143 last night. Nothing serious, but it was damped at 1144 and has remained so."

"Down for repairs, eh?" his lordship commented.

"Precisely so, my lord. Solar emission," Fesswick continued, "remains normal. The . . ."

Fesswick took nearly seven minutes more to deliver his report of the happenings of the past twenty-four hours as they had been recorded on the special instruments concealed within the depths of Castle Curvert. They had been reporting their data precisely since they had been built into the castle, six hundred years before, and they would go on doing so until they were shut off—or destroyed.

All in all, everything was quite normal.

LORD CURVERT sat down behind his desk and sighed gently. "Rather dull, isn't it, Fesswick? I mean, we haven't had any real excitement since that squadron of Mizarian ships got off course and tried to land, back in '47." He gazed reminiscently at the ceiling. "Had the devil's own time with them for a while, there."

"A masterful piece of work on your part, if I may say so."

"Thank you," his lordship said absently. "Fesswick has it occurred to you that our work may soon be completed on this planet?"

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"The thought has crossed my mind, my lord."

"They've come up fast, Fesswick. In another half century, they may be ready to go to the stars, and a hidden Observer will no longer be necessary. Still, it's been interesting, hasn't it?"

"*Very* interesting, my lord."

There was a note in Fesswick's voice that made Lord Curvert look curiously at his butler. He had always regarded Fesswick as —well, as part of the machinery. He was simply *there*. He had *always* been there. To imagine Castle Curvert without Fesswick was to imagine Egypt without the pyramids. And yet—

"You've been with the family for a long time, haven't you, Fesswick?"

Instead of answering immediately, Fesswick turned to look at the shield on the wall, upon which was emblazoned the Curvert arms—*Vert, on a pale or, a heart of the field.*

There was pride in Fesswick's voice when he spoke. "In a sense, my lord, I have only been with the family four generations. I was sent in as a new model to replace my predecessor in the year 1155, shortly after your great-grandfather was created the first Baron du Coeur Vert by Henry II for his services following the overthrow of the unhappy usurper, Stephen. Those were exciting times, my lord." He turned to face his master again.

"In another sense, my lord," he went on, "I have been with the family much longer. Since all the pertinent memories were transferred from the brain of my predecessor to my own, I have a sense of continuity that goes back to the establishment of the Observership, more than eight thousand years ago."

Lord Curvert, who had scarcely entered his twelfth decade, felt suddenly humble before the majesty of eighty centuries of time.

THERE was a rap at the door. "Charles!" The door opened before either Fesswick or Lord Curvert could answer, and Lady Curvert swept in. "Ah, there you are. Good morning, Fesswick. Charles, I have arrived at a full intuition. The Thregonnese. We should investigate at once."

"The metamorphs of Thregonn? Good heavens, you don't say so!" Lord Curvert stood up from his chair. "But how could they have come here?"

Lady Curvert shook her head. "I can't tell you that."

His lordship looked at Fesswick. "How about that, Fesswick, old man? Could a spaceship have landed recently without registering on the detectors?"

"Highly unlikely, my lord."

Lord Curvert looked back at his wife. "Fesswick says it's highly unlikely, my dear."

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"My intuition is never wrong, Charles," Lady Curvert replied with dignity.

"That's true, eh, Fesswick?"

"Quite true, my lord. Her ladyship has never been known to err in matters of intuition."

"Very well, then; given the datum that there are Thregonnese on the planet, the question is: how did they get here? That seems to me to be logically deducible, which puts it in your department."

"I shall endeavor to give satisfaction, my lord." His high speed robotic brain was capable of working such problems in minute fractions of a second, so he continued without a pause: "It is obvious, my lord, that, in order to get here from Thregonn, the metamorphs must have come by interstellar vessel. The only way such a vessel could have entered the Solar System without registering on the detectors would be to utilize a screen that would prevent the telltale wake from the drive energies from reaching us."

"But there is no such screen, Fesswick," Lady Curvert objected.

"With all due apologies, my lady," said Fesswick, "there *is* such a screen. The Sun itself. Interstellar drive energies cannot penetrate through the core of a star without absorption."

"Then their ship must have entered the Solar System by coming in from the opposite side of the Sun from Earth?" Lady Curvert said.

"Precisely so, my lady."

"But look here, Fesswick," said his lordship, "that's all very well for getting them into the Solar System, but it doesn't answer at all for getting them to Earth itself. So far, you've gotten them a hundred million miles from Earth, with the Sun between us. The question is: How did they get *here?*"

"The *Viper*, my lord," said Fesswick imperturbably.

"The *Viper?*"

EXACTLY, my lord. The Venus Interplanetary Probe Electro-Rocket. It was, if you will recall, an unmanned, automatic probe rocket designed to make an orbit close to Venus, take photographs, and return to Earth—an orbit which necessitated its being, for a time, on the opposite side of the Sun from Earth."

"Oh, yes. I remember seeing the photographs in the *Times*. Quite good ones they were, too," Lord Curvert said musingly. "Then, while the *Viper* was on the other side of the Sun, the Thregonnese simply attached a capsule to the side of it and rode it back to Earth."

"Exactly, my lord. It could have been done in no other way."

"The timing is exactly rig-

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too," said Lord Curvert thoughtfully. "Naturally, we had no reason to suspect anything at the time; it was simply another American rocket returning home. It landed in the Pacific, as I recall, and the American Navy didn't find it for nearly an hour—plenty of time for the Thregonnese to detatch their capsule and be on their way. Probably used a distorter to foul up the Navy's radar a bit, so that it would take more time to find the *Viper*."

"Without doubt, my lord," Fesswick agreed.

"Very ingenious of them," said his lordship. "Very. But you see what this implies, don't you? They have been on Earth for nearly a year—for what purpose we have, as yet, no notion. And now, suddenly, they advertise their presence almost blatantly.

"Their very method of entry shows that they are aware of the presence of a Galactic Observer on this planet, so one would think that they would do their best to remain in concealment."

"Do you fear a trap, Charles?" Lady Curvert asked calmly.

"Let us say that, at the very least, they are attempting to draw the attention of the Galactic Observer, and that they have succeeded. Why? They want to find out who the Galactic Observer is; they want to be able to put their finger on me, as it were.

"On the other hand, this is almost *too* blatant to be a trap. They not only advertise their presence, but practically tell me how they got here. It's almost as if they wanted me to recognize it as a trap. Still, that seems a little too much, doesn't it? We don't have all the data as yet, and, as a chap I used to know once remarked, 'It is a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence. It biases the judgement.' "

"Shall I begin preparations, my lord?" asked Fesswick.

"Immediately. That's where they've baited their hook very nicely, you see; we have no choice but to investigate. However, we shall take every precaution." He frowned suddenly. "By the by, Fesswick, I am scheduled to address the House of Lords tomorrow. We'll have to send a proxy. Fortunately, I've already written the speech."

"Shall I attend to it personally, my lord?"

"By no means! I want you *here*—at the controls."

"Certainly, my lord. I'll send Elsie, the upstairs maid; she should be able to carry out the deception competently."

"Quite. Now, let's get with it, Fesswick. The game, as my friend used to remark, is afoot."

DURING the reign of Queen Victoria, when the British Empire was at its peak, Lord

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Curvert had had the opportunity of chuckling inwardly—though deploring outwardly—when he was told of the horrible fate that might face an Englishman stationed in some far-off place. Accompanied by a sad shake of the head, the story usually went something like this: "Terrible thing about Lord Greystoke. Hadn't you heard? Greystoke's gone native. Africa, you know. Deplorable. Doesn't even dress for dinner any more, so I hear."

What caused Lord Curvert's inward mirth was, of course, that the first thing a Galactic Observer did when stationed on a planet was to "go native". One not only had to blend in, one had to change with the times. One had to age one's appearance slowly and bring up "children"—parts played by one or more of the robots—and then, at the right time, one became one's own son while a robot played the older man and finally "died". Such things required a chameleonlike ability to adapt, to change one's personality as one might change one's hat.

Thus it is not to be considered remarkable that Ben and Cordelia Holler, who stepped out of a dark alley near Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco, bore no resemblance whatever to Lord and Lady Curvert, either in appearance or manner.

"Do we make the scene here for a bit," Cordelia asked, "or do we cut out for New York soonest?"

"We cut out for N. Y., chick," Ben said. "Those squares might have pegged us if we'd used a teleporter into the Village, but they won't dig the G.O. making it on a jet plane. Let's get this wild gig going, chicky."

They walked out into the fog-filled light that spilled from the street lamps.

Ben chuckled. "Let's grab a cab. I mean, like we got bread to blow, so let's blow it."

She grinned up at him. "Crazy, man! I mean, *real* crazy!"

A FEW hours later, they were in Manhattan.

The roundabout method of arrival had been absolutely necessary. If Fesswick, at the controls of the teleportation projector, had put them directly in New York, there was a slight chance that the Thregonnese detectors might have registered the activity of the materialization field. On the other hand, it was necessary to get into the United States without going through the formality of passing through Immigration and Customs.

"First thing, baby," Ben said as they came out of the subway exit at Waverly Place, "is to tag us a pad. Dig? Then we make the scene at the Kettle and a couple of the other cool spots for kicks."

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BEN and Cordelia made the scene in the Village for seven days before they went anywhere near the Venus Club. They didn't want to seem anxious, so they played it cool. They strolled into the Venus Club late one Friday evening, and the joint was really swinging. The kookiest-looking quartet this side of an H-kick nightmare were blowing out a beat crazy enough to make any cat flip his gasket.

Ben and Cordelia sat down, ordered a couple espressos, and kept playing it cool, just digging the whole bit.

The four musicians were hot; there was no question of that. And cool at the same time. But both Ben and Cordelia could tell at a glance that they were not—definitely not—human beings dressed up in fancy suits. They varied in color from pale pink to deep purple—a drummer, a trumpeter, a clarinetist, and a bass viol player. The lips of the trumpeter and the clarinetist formed the instruments they played. The bass player's belly formed the sounding box of his instrument, with the strings running from his nose to a point below where his navel should have been. The drummer's belly ballooned out like a kettledrum, with a flat drumhead just below his sternum.

It was easy to see why they had been able to pass themselves off as dressed-up humans; the "costumes" looked too outre, too artificial to be real. But the dead giveaway was the drummer.

He had four arms.

Try *that* with a costume sometime!

"Frantically cool," said Cordelia.

Ben scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "I'm hip," he agreed.

They were Thregonnese, all right. There was no other race in the known Galaxy that could change the shape of their bodies that way.

The bass player stepped out from the others and began chanting in time to the music. At first, it seemed to be nothing but nonsense syllables of the *rooty-ooty-yeek-yeek-boo-da-da* type, then both Ben and Cordelia recognized that he was chanting in a jazzed-up version of Basic Galactic, the *lingua franca* of space.

"Hey, Observer, give us a buzz!
We're in trouble like never was!
Every night we sing this bit,
Hoping you'll be digging it.
Listen, G.O., to our moan;
Kindly call us on the phone!
Listen to our wailing yelp;
What we mean is: Man, like—help!"

There was a long wailing note on the trumpet and a little flurry of sobs from the coronet, and the piece ended with a teeth-rattling roll from the drum.

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"COOL," said Cordelia, crushing out her cigarette.

"Frantically cool," agreed Ben. He looked at his wristwatch. "Time to cut out now, but we will definitely have to make this scene tomorrow."

They finished their coffee and strolled out. By then, the musicians had left the bandstand and were nowhere to be seen.

Cordelia waited until they were a full block away before she spoke. "Do we give them a buzz? What kind of crazy hassle do you figure they're hung up in?"

"You got no hunch?"

"Man, like I dig them the least. Can it hurt to phone?"

"Don't know, chick. Maybe we ought to—"

He thought it over for a minute. Which would be best—to sneak up on them quietly, without letting them know he was anywhere around, and hit all four of them fast—or to take them at their word and call them on the phone?

The trouble was that it was impossible to trust a Thregonnese any farther than you could throw a bonfire by the smoke. The metamorphs of Thregonn weren't vicious, but they were charcterized by a low sense of humor and a way of thinking that was definitely weird by human standards.

He decided he'd chance it. He said, "Come on, chick," and went into a drug store on the next corner. He got the number of the Venus Club and dialed it.

"Venus Club," said a voice.

"You're under arrest," said the Observer in clipped Galactic.

"Are you the Observer?" asked the voice in the same language.

"That's right. And you know you're not supposed to be on this planet. It's still under quarantine."

"Believe me," said the other, "I wouldn't be here at all if I could get away. None of us would. For a while, there, we were afraid maybe you'd never notice us."

"So far," said the Observer, "you haven't attracted the attention of the local authorities, but if you do, I'll slap a charge against you that will—"

"Hey, now!" the Thregonnese interrupted. "We know the law! This was only a misdemeanor. Landing for refueling without authorization, is all."

"*I'll* tell *you* what the law is," the Observer said. "Now, what's all this fuss about, anyhow?"

"Well, first of all, it started out as a joke. You know?"

"Sure. I know all about it," the Observer said sarcastically. "That's why I'm spending my time asking you questions. What the hell happened?"

"Well, there was this bet, see. Lubix, Forbin, Alisnokine, and I had bet some friends of ours that we could come in here, land,

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pick up a—uh—a souvenir, and come back without your catching us. Without even knowing we'd been here. See?"

"So far, yes," said the Observer in a very cold voice.

"Well, the guys we were betting against must've got cute," the Thregonnese went on. "They bollixed up our space capsule, and we couldn't take off again. And now that the U.S. Navy has the capsule, we can't do anything about it at all."

"The U.S. Navy? Now wait a minute; you can't . . ."

Then he heard sudden loud noises from the phone, a voice in English said, "Chiggers! The cops!" and the line went dead.

Cordelia, who had been standing near the doorway of the drugstore, where she could watch the door of the Venus Club, walked over to the phone booth and said, in a low voice, "Like, some cops just went in. Wonder what they're bugged about?"

"I hope," Ben said fervently, "that those cats don't goof now. Otherwise, we'll all be in the soup!"

LORD CURVERT glared at his copy of the New York *Daily News* in a medium dudgeon. There, looking out from the front page with idiotic grins, were four of the most disreputable-looking men his lordship had ever had the misfortune to gaze upon.

"At least," he said grudgingly, "they managed to metamorphose into reasonably human shape before they were arrested. I hate to think what might have happened if the police had arrested them while they were still in the outlandish shapes they were wearing when we saw them last."

Lady Curvert sipped at her tea and looked at the headlines.

VENUS CLUB OWNERS NABBED IN NARCOTICS RAID

$10,000 Heroin Cache Found in Coffee House

"It's ridiculous," said her ladyship rather peevishly. "It makes no sense at all! Why should four Thregonnese want to do anything so silly as use or sell heroin? They couldn't have become addicted to it, could they, Charles?"

"I think not. Incompatible metabolism, eh, Fesswick?"

Fesswick placed more buttered toast on the small tray next to the marmalade pot. "Quite incompatible, my lord. Heroin would kill a Thregonnese within three minutes if injected into the bloodstream. Sniffing it, as I believe is often done by addicts, would cause unconsciousness very rapidly."

"Then why should they do anything so silly?" her ladyship repeated.

"I confess, my lady, that I am thus far unable to deduce the machinations lying behind these

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highly peculiar circumstances," Fesswick admitted.

Lord Curvert poured himself another cup of tea. "All the data we have thus far aren't worth a ha'penny for the lot. The story they gave me over the telephone was that they had come to Earth on a bet, to pick up a souvenir of some kind, that one of the Thregonnese betting against them had done something to their space capsule, and that somehow —Heaven only knows how!—the United States Navy has gained possession of the capsule. All of which could be a tissue of lies from one end to the other, damn it." He looked searchingly at his butler. "What's *your* opinion, Fesswick?"

"The story as it stands, my lord, is not consistent with the facts as we know them, but that is merely to say that we have no conclusive evidence of any kind."

Lord Curvert snorted at that and looked at his wife. "And how is your intuition this morning, my dear?"

"Well, Charles," she said, smiling rather timidly, "I have a feeling you ought to do *something*—but I'm not at all sure what."

"Well, damn it all, we *have* to do something! The family has held the Observership perfectly for eight thousand years—guarded Earthmen from interference, so that they could develop their own civilization. I'm not going to have that record spoilt by four Thregonnese clowns!"

"Couldn't we just help them to escape with the teleporter?" Lady Curvert asked helpfully. "Then you could put the collars on them and ship them off."

"Don't be an idiot," his lordship growled, staring into his teacup.

Lady Curvert looked hurt.

"It can't be done, my lady," Fesswick said quietly. "We used to be able to do such things easily, but, in these days, when the cells of a modern gaol are made of steel, we find ourselves hampered by the fact that a teleporter field is badly distorted if one attempts to project it into a metal-enclosed space."

"Dear me," said Lady Curvert. She looked at her husband, saw that he was far too deep in thought to be disturbed, and turned back to Fesswick. "Is there anything at all you and I can do?"

"Not, I'm afraid, at the moment, my lady," said the robot with dignity. "When both Logic and Intuition have failed, we must resort to Action and Ingenuity, and those are in his lordship's department." He poured Lady Curvert another cup of tea. "I am quite sanguine, my lady, over the prospect of his lordship's solving the problem very shortly. He always has."

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THE police chemist who took the small package of heroin from the safe to analyze it was very careful with the stuff. His job was to run it through an analysis so that he could testify in court that it really was heroin. He didn't let the package out of his sight for more than thirty seconds.

Which was plenty long enough.

He was setting up his testing apparatus, so he didn't see a long-fingered, aristocratic hand appear out of nowhere, take the package, and replace it with an exactly similar one.

When the contents of the package turned out to be sugar, the chemist was surprised. The District Attorney was more than surprised; he was furious.

But there was *nothing* that either of them could do.

There was even more surprise in Castle Curvert when Fesswick reported his own analysis of the powder to his master.

"The substance, my lord," he said in his precise voice, "is not heroin."

"Not heroin?" said his lordship.

"No, my lord. It is Varesh powder."

"Ah-hah!" his lordship expostulated. "And they brought plenty of it, didn't they?"

"Yes, my lord. Enough, shall we say, to hypnotize every government official on Earth, if that became necessary. It only needs to be activated."

"Things are beginning to fall into place, Fesswick."

"Yes, my lord."

"Lost their equipment, didn't they, Fesswick?" he said, grinning.

"It would appear so, my lord," said Fesswick, returning the grin.

"The next step, Fesswick, is to appear to fall in with their nefarious plan."

"Yes, my lord. I shall begin preparation immediately."

OMBOSER, Lubix, Forbin, and Alsnokine stepped out of the court building and walked down the imposing-looking steps toward the sidewalk.

"It's about time they let us out," Omboser snarled in Thregonnese. "I knew that as soon as they analyzed the Varesh powder they would realize that it was not one of their local drugs—but I didn't know it would take the primitive fools that long to analyze it."

Lubix patted the pocket of the suit he was wearing. "Well, we got it back, and that's what's important."

"You idiots!" Forbin hissed, "cease your chatter! The Galactic Observer could be anywhere around."

They all glanced around apprehensively. Alsnokine whispered,

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"Do you think he can speak or understand Thregonnese?"

"Probably not," said Forbin, "but there's no need of talking loud enough for everyone to hear."

"What I want to know," Lubix said as they headed toward the subway entrance, "is, who's the creep who called the cops on us?"

"That character from the Musician's Union, obviously," said Omboser. "If Alsnokine hadn't acted so guilty when he came into the office, nothing would have happened."

"What was I supposed to do? Leave it out there for him to look at?" Alsnokine asked defensively. "How could I know he wasn't the Observer himself?"

"Quit arguing, you two!" Forbin snapped. "We haven't lost anything but a little time. Let's get back to the club and hope that the Observer will contact us again."

"If Omboser hadn't been such a blockhead," Alsnokine began, "we wouldn't . . ."

"Ahh, shut *up!*" said Forbin.

WHEN they reached the Venus Club, a little more than a mile north of the station at Centre Street, Omboser produced his key, unlocked the front door, and went in, followed by his three coconspirators. They stopped suddenly at the sight of a tall, rather handsome, impeccably dressed gentleman who was seated at a table in the middle of the room, sipping at a small cup of espresso.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," he said with utter aplomb. "That machine of yours makes quite excellent coffee." He was speaking very cultivated Galactic.

"The Observer," the four Thregonnese said in a ragged chorus.

"Exactly," said Lord Curvert. "You may refer to me as Mr. Smith. Not as original an alias, perhaps, as, say, 'Sebastian Tombs', but it will suffice. Now, to which of you was I speaking when the local constabulary so precipitately interrupted?"

"That was me," said Omboser.

"Then pray sit down, make yourselves comfortable, and tell me all about your troubles. Consider me your Father Confessor, and tell all."

They sat down slowly, all four pairs of eyes focused steadily on the intruder.

Finally, Omboser smiled. "Well, sir, as I was saying," he began, "we had this little bet, you see. We knew it was illegal, but it was just a harmless prank. We were to come here, and then go back, that's all. Nobody would be hurt, nobody would be the wiser, and we would win our bet. See?"

"I understand so far," Lord Curvert said agreeably. "Then what happened?"

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"Well . . ." Omboser began very hesitantly.

"This idiot," said Forbin, pointing a thumb at Omboser, "was supposed to stay behind with our capsule. Instead, he went swimming."

"It gets pretty boring, doing nothing," said Omboser pettishly.

"He went swimming," Forbin repeated. "We had the capsule underwater, in a little bay at Lukiuni Atoll, out in the Pacific."

"There was nobody on the atoll at all," Omboser said. "It looked perfectly all right to go swimming."

"Nevertheless," Forbin continued, "while Omboser was out cavorting—he'd changed himself into a porpoise for the purpose—a United States Navy patrol plane spotted the capsule from the air."

"I told you we should have sunk it in deeper water," Omboser said.

Forbin ignored him. "By the time Omboser got back from his spree, the U. S. Navy was in charge—with a light cruiser. Since we'd left most of our eqipment in the capsule, we didn't even have the instruments we needed to sneak in and get the capsule back."

"The Navy thinks the capsule is a Russian job," Lubix supplied helpfully. "They haven't opened it yet, because they're afraid there might be a thermonuclear bomb inside it. But they've sure got it surrounded while they try to figure out what to do."

"So," Forbin finished, "we figured we'd better get in touch with you and tell you what happened. We rented this place and put on a show that we thought would attract your attention without revealing ourselves to the natives. It took us a long time to get the hang of how things are done on this planet, though. Otherwise, we'd've done this sooner."

Then all four of them sat there in silence, watching the Observer, waiting for his decision.

Lord Curvet thought the matter over carefully, then came to a decision. "Very well, my fumble-fingered friends, we'll see what can be done." He looked up into the air a foot or so above his head. "Rally round, Mr. Jones," he said, "there's work to be done."

The calm voice of Fesswick came out of the air. "Anytime you're ready, Mr. Smith."

SERGEANT Thaddeus McClusky, USMC, shrugged his shoulder a little to adjust the weight of the heavy machine rifle that was slung there. So did Corporal Quinn. Both of them looked with respectful eyes at Lieutenant (jg) Fordham, USN, and

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listened silently as he spoke.

"Remember, men; that may be an atomic bomb, down there, so keep on your toes. Absolutely no one is allowed to pass inside this perimeter after dark. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said Segeant McClusky.

"Yes, sir," said Corporal Quinn.

"Very well. Carry on."

Salutes were exchanged, and the two Marines waited silently while the Naval officer went on down the line to the next post. As soon as he was out of earshot, McClusky muttered a dirty word. ". . . deckape shavetail,' he added.

"That's the way the goddam Navy operates," said Quinn philosophically. "We been here six months watching that gizmo while the Navy sits on its duff and wonders what to do about it. And what do they do? Why, they send us a fresh jaygee from Stateside who tells us to do exactly what we been doin' all along. That takes real brains, that does."

Sergeant McClusky nodded his agreement. "'Remember, that may be an atomic bomb, down here, so keep on your toes,'" he mimicked. "Well, you can just bet your stripey little shoulder boards we will, sir. Yes, sir. We'll watch very closely, sir, and if that thing goes off, we'll call you right up on the telephone, sir. Won't we, Corporal Quinn?"

"Just as fast as ever we can," agreed Corporal Quinn. "We will be moving very rapidly, Sergeant McClusky."

They turned to look at the little, shallow lagoon which held the unknown thing. There were no lights illuminating it; the Navy didn't want to attract the attention of any high-flying Russian planes that might be looking the area over. But the light of a tropical full moon cast its silvery radiance over the glittering waters of the lagoon.

The thing itself had been surrounded with a steel net to keep large fish from approaching it and—possibly—setting it off. Underwater sonar constantly probed the depths to make sure that Russian frogmen didn't try to sneak in. The Navy didn't think the Russians knew where their toy was, but they were taking no chances.

YOU know," said McClusky, "when I was a kid, I used to love those movies of the South Seas. Remember? They had scenes in 'em just like this."

"Yeah," Quinn agreed softly. "Tropical moon—sea breezes—palm trees gently waving—waves rolling softly against the warm sands."

"That's very poetic," McClusky said in mild astonishment.

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"I remember it from an old movie ad," Quinn said.

"All we need is some guitar music," McClusky said.

"Yeah. And Dorothy Lamour in a sarong."

"Will I do?" asked a soft, throaty contralto voice from behind them.

Both men spun around, unslinging their rifles with the easy grace of long practice.

Then they froze, as if someone had doused them with a few gallons of liquid air. Their eyes glazed, and their mouths hung agape.

It was not Dorothy Lamour, they decided, because she was not wearing a sarong. She was not even wearing a grass skirt.

Sergeant McClusky recovered his voice. "You ain't supposed to be here, dressed like that, ma'am," he said to the vision of loveliness.

"Undressed like that," Corporal Quinn corrected automatically.

"Even if you was dressed," said McClusky, "you hadn't ought to be here. Women aren't allowed on this island." He was still trying to figure out what to do when a voice bellowed out from the next post down the shore.

"Corporal of the guard! Post Number Five! I got a woman on my post—a *nekkid* woman! Whadda I do now?"

Before Corporal Quinn could answer, two more posts called out that they had the same trouble.

"Why all the fuss?" asked the girl, wide-eyed. "We just want to go swimming in your pretty lagoon."

"No, you don't," said McClusky, recovering his wits at last. "You're under arrest, lady." He reached out to grab her with one brawny fist, but his hand closed on empty air. The girl was deceptively fast. She backed away, still smiling, and McClusky made another lunge for her.

He missed and lost his balance as she danced back out of the way. As he fell forward, he heard Quinn yell: "Halt! Halt or I fire!"

He broke his fall with the butt of his rifle, and twisted to an upright sitting position. The girl, he noticed, was running away from the lagoon, toward the sea, with Quinn after her in hot pursuit, still calling for her to halt.

All around, there were similar cries. Sergeant McClusky wondered how many unclad females there were running around on Lukiuni Atoll—where there couldn't possibly be any women.

NOT a man there noticed what was going on out in the lagoon itself. The figure of a man suddenly materialized from nowhere a few inches above the surface of the water. Then he

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dropped in with scarcely a splash.

Since Fesswick did not breathe, there was no necessity for him to wear any of the usual diving equipment. All he had to do was swim to the steel net, cut through it, and head for the little Thregonnese space capsule. He wasn't the least bit worried about the Navy's probing sonar beams; the nullifiers operated by Lord Curvert would take care of them. As far as the sonar operators could tell, there was nothing at all unusual in the lagoon.

Fesswick got busy opening the airlock of the little capsule.

Up on shore, Sergeant McClusky yelled at Corporal Quinn, who was several yards away, at the sea's edge, staring into the waves. Lights were coming on all over the tiny atoll. Pounding footsteps could be heard from every quarter as confused men ran every which way.

"She just dived into the sea and never came up," Corporal Quinn was saying wonderingly.

"Why didn't you shoot?" bellowed McClusky.

"Who the hell do you think I am?" Quinn bellowed back. "Mike Hammer?"

So far, nobody else had fired a shot, either, and by that time, all four of the Tregonnese had dived into the sea, changed into porpoises, and were swimming rapidly away from the atoll.

The final surprise came when, with a great geyser of erupting water, the Tregonnese space capsule shot up out of the lagoon and vanished rapidly into the moonlit sky.

There would be a lot of explaining to do that night and for many nights to come, in Navy circles.

But there would never be any explanation.

AND now," said Lord Curvert gently, "the question arises as to what to do with you gentlemen."

They were sitting in the Venus Club again. The space capsule, indetectable to any Earth science, was sitting on the roof of the building.

"Why, just make your report and let us go," Forbin said politely. "It was only a misdemeanor. We haven't done anything felonious. We didn't expose anything to the natives or interfere in any way. Just let us go, and we'll pay the fine according to the law."

Lord Curvert was nodding slowly, and there was an oddly sleepy look in his eyes. "Yes," he said. "Certainly. Just let you go."

The Thregonnese looked at each other with delight, and then looked back at the Observer.

"Or, better yet," said Forbin insidiously, "just let us stay for a while. How about that?"

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"Yes. Yes," his lordship said rather glassily. "I could just let you stay for a while."

"As a matter of fact," Forbin went on in the same tone, "we have a few favors we'd like you to do for us."

"Favors," said Lord Curvert. "Certainly. What favors?"

"Well, for instance, why don't you stand on your head?"

"Certainly."

"And click your heels together," added Omboser, ignoring the scowls that Forbin and the others shot him.

"Certainly," agreed his lordship. Placing hands and head on the floor, Lord Curvert solemnly upended himself, balanced carefully, and clapped his heels together.

"We've done it!" Forbin said gleefully. "We're in!"

"You sure that assistant of his —that Mr. Jones can't reach us here?" Alsnokine asked, a trifle apprehensively. "Or see us?"

"Not a chance," Forbin said. "I turned on the nullifiers in our ship myself."

"We've done it," Lubix gloated. "In spite of all the setbacks, we have our ship, and we have the Observer. Now we can start having a little fun."

"Are you gentlemen just going to leave me like this?" Lord Curvert asked politely.

They all turned to look at him. He did a neat handspring-and-flip, and landed on his feet. "A confession of intent," he said mildly, "is bad enough. When combined with an actual attempt, it becomes very bad indeed."

None of them said anything.

"Oh, no," his lordship went on, "I'm not hypnotized. In the first place, the substance you have been thinking is Varesh powder is nothing but powdered sugar. I saw you put it in the activator in your capsule, and I saw you put a pinch of it into the air. But I'm afraid sugar just doesn't have the proper effect.

"In the second place, even if it had been Varesh powder, nothing would have happened, because I am wearing filter plugs in my nostrils, just as you are. The one difference is that my plugs function, while yours don't.

"I'm afraid that while my assistant, Mr. Jones, was in your capsule, he put a few rather clever little gimmicks into your controls. In addition, he sprayed a little genuine Varesh powder through the teleporter just a few seconds ago. And it's having its effect, isn't it?"

IT was. Robbed of their conscious volition, the human body shapes which the Thregonnese had assumed were beginning to look oddly lumpy as they tended to return to their normal shapes.

"I am sending you back to

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Thregonn for punishment," he said. "I'll tell you what the conspiracy was, and you correct me if I'm wrong, so that everything will be nice and legal.

"You intended to use this Venus Club set-up to trap me first. Then, after I had been hypnotized, you intended to take over the various governments of Earth. Now, there, I'm a little hazy—just what was your reason for wanting to take over? Were you going to set yourselves up as supreme dictators, so that you could push everybody around?" He looked at Forbin as he spoke.

"For a while," admitted the thoroughly hypnotized Forbin. "Then, if we got bored, we thought it might be fun to start an atomic war among these primitive people."

"Worse than I thought," said Lord Curvert distastefully. "I hope they straighten you out thoroughly on Thregonn."

By this time, the four Thregonnese had returned to their "normal" shape. They looked like four fat, pink kewpie dolls.

"All right," said Lord Curvert, "let's go. You'll get in your ship and go straight to Thregonn, understand?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused. "Straight to Thregonn."

"And just to make sure you do, you'll give yourselves another dose of Varesh powder every twenty-four hours. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," they chorused.

"Fine. Let's go."

They went up to the roof, and the four fat kewpies climbed into the vessel. The airlock closed, and a few seconds later the little spaceship fired skywards.

"Take me home, Fesswick," said Lord Curvert.

THAT'S very odd," said Lady Curvert.

Lord Curvert looked up apprehensively from his *Times*. "Not another one, I hope."

"Oh, no, Charles. Not another case. I was just thinking that it was very odd that the paper should come out with an editorial on the Teddy boys today. The editor says that juvenile delinquency is getting worse and something must be done to stop it."

"I'll write a letter to the *Times*, my dear," said Lord Curvert.

Fesswick shimmered in through the doorway. "I beg to report, my lord, that Thregonn acknowledges the landing of the capsule. The four have been placed in arrest by the authorities. Their parents have been notified."

"Good," said Lord Curvert. "People here on Earth complain about juvenile delinquency, Fesswick. Just wait until they find out what it's like on a Galactic scale."

THE END

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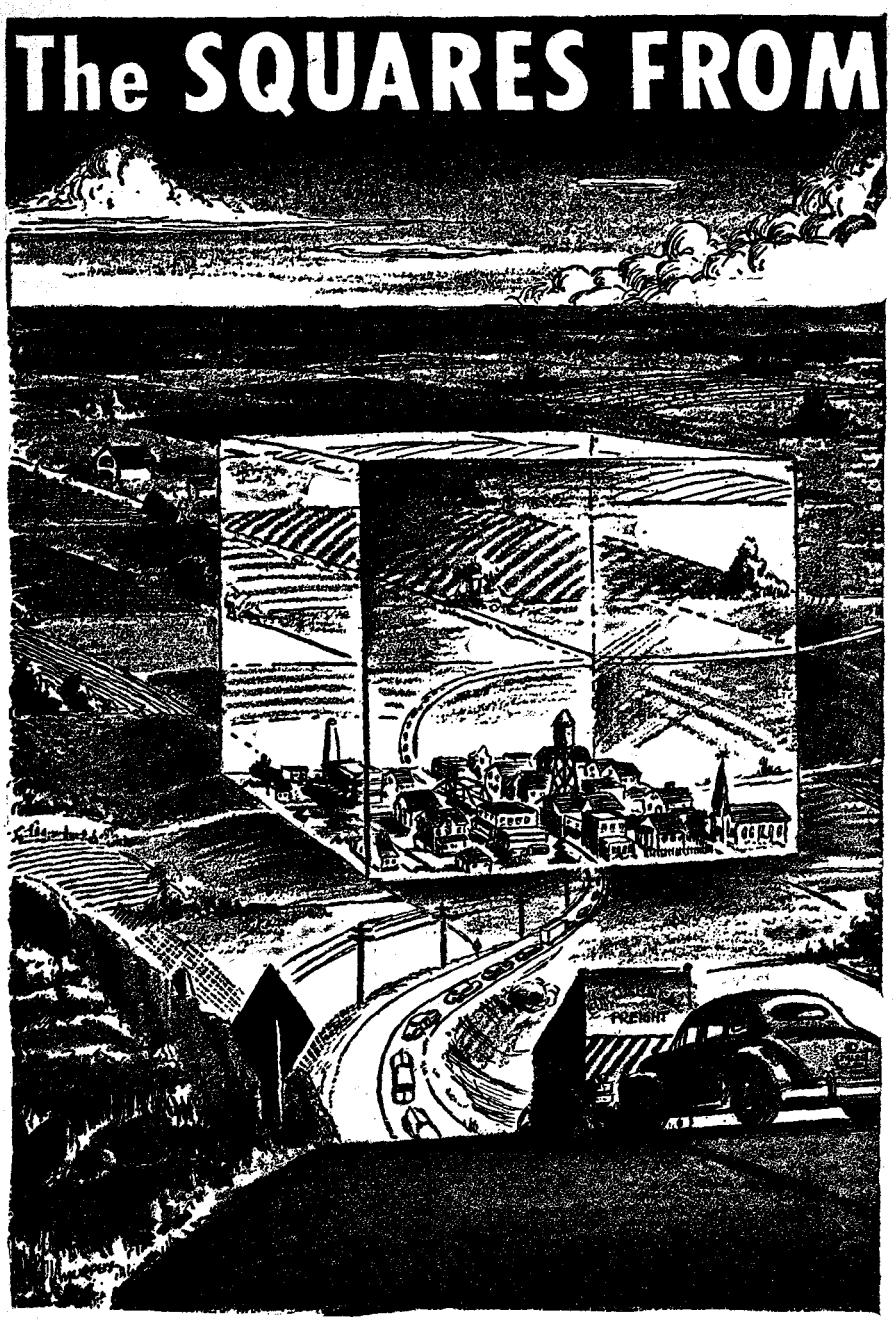

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SPACE

By P. F. Costello

Earth's only hope of defeating these monsters from space hinged on the courage of a newspaper man and the girl he loved

THEY CAME from above. Shimmering, silvered, opalescent squares of light that descended swiftly, silently onto the broad planes of Earth. They were gleaming, terrifyingly immense shapes that had appeared without warning in the clear sky of a July morning.

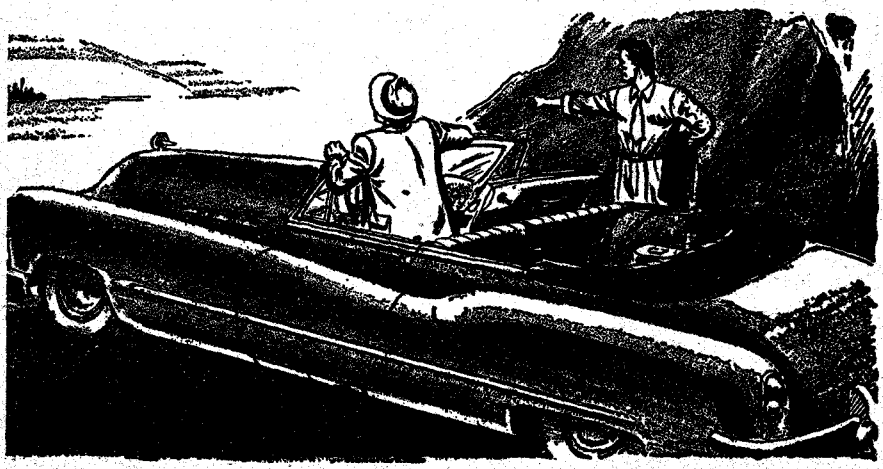
They were four in number. They struck various sections of the northern hemisphere and rested in ghastly shining silence.

Within their high walls were trapped whole villages with all the inhabitants.

They rested...

Persons who saw the vast squares were blinded by the shimmering brilliance of their walls.

Someone got to a phone. The alarm spread. Within minutes the first incredible rumors were circulating. From an army camp sixty-four miles from one of the squares, an armored division was dispatched to investigate the phenomenon.



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Newspaper offices began to hum with the impact of the fantastic story.

Then the squares moved upward again, travelling with blinding, dizzying speed. They vanished from the atmosphere of Earth within forty-five minutes of the instant they had first been sighted.

And with them disappeared every human being who had been trapped within their gleaming silver walls....

"VANISHED? Disappeared? What kinda gag you trying to hand me?" Leslie Trent said to his managing editor. He had to raise his voice to be heard over the confusion of the city room. When he'd left for lunch an hour ago the hottest story in the making was an expected announcement by a politician regarding the city's budget. Now, crowded about the teletypes that poured wire copy into the paper, were the publishers, the city editors, two or three re-write men, and a cluster of picture-desk personnel and copy boys.

Osterphillips, the *Blade's* managing editor, held Leslie's arm tightly. They were standing at the rear of the frenzied group who surged around the teletypes, jerking out the copy as fast as it came in.

Leslie still wore a hat and coat and there was a pipe stuck negligently in his mouth. He was a sparely built young man, with sandy hair and his normal expression of cynical good humor.

"I'll give it to you once more," Osterphillips said, in a somewhat ragged voice. "Everything we've got so far is coming from an AP correspondent in Broadville, Indiana."

"Does he drink?" Leslie inquired.

"His story is the first confirmation we've had on reports from four separate areas. This is no gag, Les." Osterphillips ran a hand distractedly through his thinning hair. "Broadville, Indiana, is gone, vanished. The people, anyway. Eyewitnesses swear that a huge silver square settled over the town, walling it in. When it lifted every single person in the city had disappeared. I want you to hop down there as fast as you can."

"Okay, but I still think this has the odor of the phony about it. What about the other places that are supposed to have been attacked by this opium eater's Pied Piper? Any dope on them yet?"

"Just rumors, so far. According to them, one of these things landed in Kansas, another in Pennsylvania, and the last somewhere in Alabama."

"Not to forget little old Broadville," Leslie said. "Okay, I'll get going."

"Send in lots of color and interviews and get pictures of the people of the town, as many as you can. I've already got a story working on the history of the place, its prominent families, and so forth. Hell, you know your job. But make it fast."

LESLIE caught a plane from Chicago that got him to Broadville in an hour. He took a cab with several other newsmen into the city.

It was a ghost town.

Leslie prowled its deserted streets, peered into its empty homes and silent schools, and the shock he had felt at first sight of the empty village deepened with every new evidence of the ghastly fate that had singled out Broadville for complete catastrophe.

He had thought the news was some sort of gag at first. Now he knew better. He had seen half-eaten meals on tables, showers still running, gas flames burning in ovens. There were cakes baked to brick-hardness in some kitchens, and coffee pots melting on stoves in other homes. Car engines had been left running all over the

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city, and the traffic lights were still blinking red and green with mindless regularity.

Everywhere the picture was the same. A thriving bustling community had been halted in its routine of living with calamitous abruptness. But how? And by what?

Leslie came out of an empty house and stood in the mid-afternoon sunlight scratching his chin. A maintenance man from the gas company of a nearby town hurried past, intent on his job of cutting the gas mains before there were any explosions.

Leslie walked along the main street, watching the workers from the water and utilities companies doing their jobs, and automatically, almost instinctively, he began to put together the story he would phone to his paper. He joined a group of newspapermen who were listening to an old man—a graying, bent figure, whose rheumy eyes were glazed with shock.

"I saw it, I tell you, and I got down on my knees right there in the field and started to pray," he said in a quivering, age-cracked voice. "It was bigger than anything I ever seen in my life and it came down from the heavens like a sign from Almighty God. It was shining and silvery and it closed in the town with its big high sides. When it went away I come running into the town looking for my little grandson and my family. But they was gone. All gone, I tell you."

He looked beseechingly at the reporters, studying each face with desperate hope. "What was it?" he asked.

The men could only shake their heads slowly. Their normal brashness was dampened by the old man's terror—and the immensity of what he had described.

Leslie left Broadville that night about eight o'clock, after having filed thousands of words, with Western Union, to his paper. Looking down at Broadville from the window of his plane he shuddered slightly. He wondered if that fate could happen to all of Earth. If some all-powerful agency could strip his world of its people, leaving it silent, ghost-like, barren.

WHEN HE landed in Chicago he called Marcia Frazer, a graduate student at the University. She answered the phone herself, and Leslie felt some of the bleak coldness leave him at the sound of her clear fresh voice.

"It's Leslie," he said. "May I come over?"

"I was hoping you'd call. I tried to get you at the paper earlier. They told me you'd flown down there. What in the name of God has happened?"

"God is undoubtedly the only source who might tell us," he said drily. "I'm not a fount of information, if that's what you're looking for."

"Come over anyway. It'll do me good to talk to you."

He took a cab to her one-and-a-half room apartment and Marcia met him at the door. She was a tall, auburn-haired girl with fine square shoulders and warm honest features.

She made two drinks and sat beside him on the sofa. She curled her slim legs beneath her and regarded him gravely.

"Well?" she said.

He shrugged. "The people of Broadville are gone, unquote," he said. "You can read that in my story tomorrow. But not much else." He shook his head. "I'm scared, Marcy. I saw a lot during the war that I never imagined I'd see topped for sheer horror. But, somehow, this damn thing is worse."

"I've had the radio on all day," Marcia said. "No one knows anything, apparently. The President spoke at three and told everyone to keep calm, continue with his work, and so

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forth. That didn't help much."

"I don't think we have to be afraid of ourselves," Leslie said. "Those squares weren't from Earth."

Marcia stared at him wordlessly. Then she said: "But, why, Leslie?"

He shrugged helplessly. "I'm no answer man, I told you."

"I want to show you something," she said. "Maybe I'm being foolish but I didn't have anything to do all day, so I tried to use my head." She crossed to a small desk and returned with a piece of paper on which she'd drawn criss-crossing lines.

Leslie glanced at it, frowning. "Explanation, please," he said.

"Okay, but don't laugh."

She sat on the arm of his chair and put her finger on an X that was drawn on the paper. "That represents Broadville, Indiana. The other X's indicate where the three other squares struck Earth. You can see that these four spots are equi-distant from one another, and that they form a diamond. I looked up the places on a map and they are almost exactly one thousand miles apart. It's just as if someone marked this area off with a compass and a ruler, then hit each corner of the square with one of these silver contraptions."

LESLIE studied the chart for a moment or so, then glanced at her. "Well, what else?" he said.

"It might not mean anything at all, of course," she said. "But doesn't it seem logical to infer from this that these silver squares came here in an orderly fashion? It obviously wasn't a hit-or-miss proposition. Further, if it *was* planned that these squares should capture human beings from equi-distant areas, then it might be that the attack was in the nature of a sampling process."

"Slow down a bit," Leslie said. "You're doing fine. But you're getting ahead of me."

"Well, I'm merely suggesting that someone or something is interested in the people of Earth, and wants to know more about them. And so, quite logically—he or it—picks up some human beings from various equi-distant areas to give him—or it—a cross-section of the people."

"Damn it, it seems too pat," Leslie said. "But you could be so right."

"Okay, supposing these attacks were a planned sampling of Earth's population," Marcia said. "Then it's logical to assume that the process isn't complete."

"Why?"

"Assuming that someone—let's say Planet X—is out to pick off a cross-section of the people of Earth, and assuming further that Planet X has space machines of some kind and an orderly approach to the job, then it's logical to assume such a methodical operation would not hinge on one test, or one sample. Planet X is obviously intelligent enough to realize that they don't have a typical sampling of our people as yet. And that would indicate that there will be more visits from the silver squares."

"That's just dandy," Leslie said with bitter humor. He lit his pipe and puffed on it for several moments in silence. "Marcy, I have the horrible feeling that you've hit on something."

"Now listen again," Marcia said excitedly. "From the center of the square that is formed by the four points of contact, I drew out thousand-mile lines on the northeast, southwest, northwest, southeast axis. It's possible, isn't it, that Planet X will maintain the thousand-mile distance between the silver squares, but criss-cross the present area on the next sampling? That would give them eight samples of a thousand squares miles of the northern hemisphere, which might be enough to complete the job."

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"If you're right, who gets it next?" Jim asked.

"A little town called Bingham, in Colorado. Two of the spots are wasteland, the third is in the Gulf of Mexico. But Bingham is right at the termination of the thousand-mile southwest line."

Leslie stood and paced the floor. "It's fantastic," he muttered. "But the whole world looks fantastic to me right now." He suddenly caught her by the shoulders. "I'm going to buy your guess-work. I'll ask the boss to let me fly out to Bingham tonight."

"Les, take me with you?" Marcia cried.

"Huh? Not a chance. You've got your studies." He gestured vaguely. "You can't go running off like that."

"Oh, to hell with the studies," Marcia said. "The world is turning upside down and you expect me to stay here conjugating early English verbs and getting giddy over the fact that Swift changed his metaphor in A Tale Of The Tub. I tell you—"

He grinned at her outburst. "Baby, it's not going to be easy, you know."

"Please take me along, Les. It was my idea, you've got to admit. Let me in on the fun, please!"

"Fun? It might not be fun."

"You know what I mean. Please, Les." She hugged him suddenly, fiercely. "I won't let you go unless you promise."

He looked at her in some confusion. He felt the full sweet lines of her body and the softness of her hair against his cheek. Their relationship had been casual and pleasant for several years. They liked the same things, had fun together, but Les had thought of her as a schoolgirl, as a youngster who wasn't quite ready for life. Now he knew better.

"Okay," he said, grinning down at her. "I'd take you anywhere."

"I won't settle for anyplace but Bingham, Colorado," she said.

ANOTHER impatient edict from my Leader," Les said, sliding into the restaurant booth beside Marcia. "He wants to know why, in a week's time, I haven't put Bingham on the map."

"Maybe we *are* wasting time," Marcia said.

Les patted her hand comfortingly. "Editors feel you're wasting time and money no matter what you're doing," he said. "We'll stick it out a few more days."

They had been in Bingham nine days now and so far there hadn't been the slightest indication that Marcia's hunch was correct.

Bingham was a village of about three thousand people. The main street was typical of small towns throughout the country. There was a general store displaying everything from feed sacks to corsets in its windows, a shoe shop, a photographer, a movie house and two restaurants—all negative in appeal. The main street ran into a grassy square ornamented by the statue of a horse and rider, who had figured somehow in Colorado's history, and beyond the square was the two-story, red-brick court house.

"Let's take a walk," Les suggested, with a distasteful glance at the cupful of what the restaurant solemnly asserted to be coffee, but which he privately felt was a concoction of roots, mud and old Brillo pads.

It was evening, and a cool breeze was blowing. The day had been hot and sultry and the change was a pleasant relief. Les and Marcia walked to the square, then returned to the hotel.

"I'll buy a beer," Les suggested.

"Sounds fine."

They went into the small lounge, took seats at the bar and ordered

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bottles of beer. Seated in a booth in the rear of the lounge, Les noticed, was a man he had seen about the town for the past week—a tall, dark-haired man of perhaps forty, with bushy eyebrows and a wide thin mouth.

"Our friend is cutting-up too," he said to Marcia.

"Who is he, do you suppose?" Marcia said.

"Well, he's obviously not a local inhabitant."

The man suddenly stood and walked toward them, a thin smile on his face. He nodded to Les and bowed slightly to Marcia.

"Forgive me for intruding," he said in a soft, slightly foreign voice. "But it seems that we are all hapless victims of this town's dullness. Perhaps we could have a drink together and talk a while." He said this tentatively, while smiling at Marcia.

"Sit down," Les said. He nodded to the bartender. "Another beer, please."

"My name is Strauss, Joseph Strauss," the man said, climbing onto a bar stool.

Les introduced himself and Marcia.

Strauss said casually, "You are a newspaperman, no?"

Les glanced at him. "How did you know that?"

"It is hardly a mystery," Strauss said, shrugging. "You have filed stories to a Chicago paper from the local Western Union office. The clerk there has talked about it. And so—" He spread thin hands deprecatingly.

"What line are you in?" Les asked bluntly.

"I am an observer," Strauss said, chuckling slightly.

"What are you observing in Bingham?"

"I don't know—yet," Strauss said. "However, I feel that something very well worth observing may occur here quite soon."

LES FELT vaguely uneasy with the man. There was something insinuating and sly about him that he didn't quite like. He nudged Marcia's knee discreetly with his own, and then finished his beer. "We were just getting ready to leave," he said.

Marcia stood up, murmured, "It was nice to meet you," and strolled to the door.

"A pity," Strauss murmured.

"We'll see you again," Les said, and went out with Marcia.

In the street, they glanced at each other. "Queer one," Les said.

"I wonder what he's waiting for?" Marcia said, frowning.

"The same thing we are," Les said. "I'd bet on that."

They walked along in silence for a few moments and then, as they passed the movie house, Les suddenly grabbed Marcia's arm. Above them had appeared a weird luminous glow.

"What is it?" Marcia said tensely.

"Wait!" Les said.

They stared upward. Directly above them the sky had changed color. Its soft evening blue was charged with a blazing radiance. The flashing tints of silver spread across the sky, from horizon to horizon, until the entire bowl of the heavens was raging with white fire.

Everyone in the streets stared fearfully upward, and then a woman's scream split the charged air as a mighty square of silver broke through the clouds and settled with blinding speed about the town of Bingham.

Les tightened his grip about Marcia's shoulder as the vast square closed about them, walling them off from the rest of Earth, blinding them with the glare of its solid, gleaming walls.

There was a second of stunned, desperate silence. Then a child, catch-

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ing the taste of fear from the adults, began to cry piteously.

"Hold me close, Les," Marcia cried.

He started to answer; but the breath was suddenly crushed from his lungs. He felt a blinding pain and knew he was falling. His arm was still about Marcia's shoulders, and she had fallen too. The concrete of the street was against his cheek, and its rough cold texture was the last thing he felt.

"YOU ARE of the last. Tell me of yourself!"

The words were forced into Leslie's mind. His eyes opened. He lay on his back staring upward at a gleaming silver ceiling. His thoughts were splintered, confused. Where was he? How had he come here?

"Typical reflex! Is there no originality in the people of Earth?"

Leslie heard no sound, but the words were somehow insistently forced into his mind. Their import was as clear as if they had been shouted into his ear.

He struggled to a sitting position, as memories came to him. There was the Sunday-stillness of the little town of Bingham. And then the vivid brightness that preceded the appearance of the mighty silver square. Marcia had been with him, his arm had been around her as they fell...

Staring about him in frantic confusion he saw that he was on a small dais in the middle of an enormous chamber. The walls of sheer shining metal seemed to rise endlessly to meet the vast domed ceiling.

Before him on a larger dais about fifty feet away squatted a huge *thing!* The folds of flesh-like substance that trembled and undulated there was a leprous gray in color, and from it emerged something that resembled a human form, but with a head magnified and distorted into nightmarish proportions.

The distance from the thing's pointed chin to its flat skull was more than six feet; and the width of the mammoth skull was even greater. Half-way between the chin and skull-top there was a hole about six inches in diameter. That aperture was the only break in the soft, trembling, gray surface of the head.

Leslie stared in silent horror at this obscenity.

"Another typical reaction. Why do you of Earth assume that creatures of another planet would resemble your own shape? Are none possessed of rudimentary intelligence?"

"What are you? What do you want of me?" Leslie cried, springing to his feet.

"Better. Direct questions indicate a glimmering of mentality."

There was no sound in the shining vaulted chamber, but Leslie knew, in some way he *knew*, that the words were emanating from within the depths of the huge leprous head.

Leslie saw then that the head rested in loose folds of flesh-like material that spread over the surface of the dais like a dirty rumpled rug. Protruding from these folds were two tiny flippers, that looked as if they might be atrophied arms.

"Tell me of yourself!"

"Where are the other people from Earth?" Leslie said. He felt now as if he were living through a rather long nightmare; but he knew it would be futile to attempt to analyze the situation. He had to accept it at its face merit, and proceed from that point onward. "You'll get no information from me until you tell me what you've done with the other people from Earth."

"Some of you are no more. Others still live. It is not important. But I must learn of Earth. I will not bring more of you here until I know more about you. Perhaps you will not be

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usable in any case."

LESLIE FELT that he was hanging to his sanity by a thin thread. This monstrous head was alive, intelligent, and needed information about Earth. He could accept those facts in cold reason. But their implications were enough to make perspiration break out on his forehead.

"You are frightened."

The words beat into his mind.

"That is the reaction that is most typical of your class. That is why I weary of you so quickly, and despair of shaping you to my needs. Fear is a necessary reaction, of course, but it must not be distorted with emotional overtones. Things fear, as they hunger and thirst, but they must do it passively, instinctively, and not give way to emotional feelings of retaliation. You of Earth have not learned that. Your fear creates unpredictable reactions. Some of you become more pliable, but others become intractable. Likewise, you have concepts that you designate as love, and loyalty, and honor, and so forth. These, too, are merely words that describe varying reactions in the specific individual. Honor and love and loyalty mean one thing to you, and another thing entirely to another person. On the whole you are a most unstable and unsatisfactory group."

"What do you want of us?" Leslie said.

"We need the movers of Earth to replenish the movers of Mercury. Many ages past, the masters of Mercury began a systematic breeding process, the end of which was the development of types like myself—beings possessing intelligence of almost infinite power. Meanwhile our movers retrogressed in the opposite direction. You have no concept for mover. Your word slave has an implication of involuntary acts that would not fit our term. Our movers are creatures without will or volition, whose only purpose is to serve the masters. However, the movers became more and more functional. The ultimate was achieved when we were able to use them for inanimate functions. We transformed them into dwellings, into tools, scientific apparatus, and even into instruments of pleasure. This had the unlooked-for effect of draining off our supply of movers, particularly since the masters' idea of pleasure was frequently destructive. The rulers became lazy and voluptuous over the years, and thoughtlessly exhausted the movers in sadistic rites until they ceased reproducing themselves. Now we must find a substitute for our movers. We have become immobile physically, as you may see. Therefore we have been sampling the movers of Earth, and so far the results are unsatisfactory. Your inconsistent concepts are an impediment in our work. We have asked your help. Some of you refuse. Others are eager to cooperate. This whimsical reaction can lead only to confusion. Perhaps you too will prove unsatisfactory."

"I am not eager to cooperate with you, if that's part of your definition of unsatisfactory," Leslie said. "What right have you to steal people from their native planet and bring them here to use as slaves?"

"Right? There is no right except our need. You seem to be intelligent. Perhaps it would be worth while talking to you again..."

When that thought faded out, Leslie felt a sudden excruciating pain at the base of his skull. His mind was dazed. He fought helplessly to remain conscious. He had a last image of the head—huge, gross, unmoving—and then he went out....

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HE OPENED his eyes to a semi-darkness. He was lying on a smooth surface. He lay still for a moment, trying to recall everything that had happened. Finally he got slowly to his feet. He felt his face and found a thick beard growing there. But he wasn't weak or hungry.

From the faint light emanating from the smooth walls he saw that he was in a cell about six feet square. There was a door with a mesh screen covering its upper half, but no other aperture.

He paced the floor, desperately trying to remain calm. He had no way of guessing what had happened to Marcia, but the horrible words of the head were ringing in his mind:

"Some of you are no more. Others still live."

He hadn't the vaguest idea how much time had passed since he'd been snatched from Earth. The three-inch beard on his face was only a slight help. His beard grew slowly, he knew from days in the South Pacific during the war. Weeks might have passed; or months.

Finally he tired of walking and sat down on the smooth floor. Then, so faintly as to make him mistrust his ears, he heard a gentle tapping noise on the opposite side of the wall against which he was leaning. Leslie turned, his heart pounding, and put his ear to the wall. The sound came again. Three measured taps, this time. He fumbled through his pockets with frantic haste and found a coin, a half-dollar. Praying that it would be heavy enough, he rapped it three times against the smooth surface.

He waited a moment, and in the coiling silence he could hear the sound of his heart and his controlled breathing. Then his signal was returned. Three short taps, and then two, with a longer interval between them. Leslie tapped out an identical signal and waited again. When the tapping resumed he realized with a sudden surge of hope that the sender was using Morse code.

The first word that he painstakingly made out was Patience. The second was Standby.

Patience! Standby!

There was no other sound from the wall.

Leslie sat back on his heels, a faint smile on his face. Someone from Earth was in the adjoining cell, and obviously had some means of beating this trap. That would be a distinct and unpleasant surprise for the head!

And with that thought came a sudden pain at the base of his skull. He cried out! His thoughts faded, his mind went blank....

LESLIE opened his eyes in the great silvered chamber. The head, obscene and omniscient, faced him from its dais. There were two creatures at Leslie's side, robots of some sort, bullet-shaped, with thin powerful legs, and coiling whip-like arms. They stood about six feet tall and reflected the light as if made of metal.

"Les!"

He turned his head at the cry. Marcia was at the opposite side of the chamber, in the grip of two more of the strange robots. He lunged toward her, but the creatures at his side moved faster, and their steel-hard flexible arms whipped about him, pinioning him helplessly. He struggled wildly but ineffectually against the tremendous strength of the metal arms.

"This is useless, of course."

Leslie thought at first that the head had forced the idea into his mind. But then he realized that the words had actually been spoken, and their echoes were ringing in the vast vaulted chamber. He turned dazedly to the sound, and saw a thin dark-haired

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man regarding him with an ironic smile. The man stood at the base of the head's dais, his hands thrust negligently into the pockets of his coat. Leslie recognized him with a start. He was Joseph Strauss, the man who'd spoken to them in the little bar at Bingham. The man who'd called himself an observer.

"Those creatures are infinitely stronger than you are," Joseph Strauss said. "I assisted in their design, so I am something of an authority on their performance," he added sardonically.

Leslie glanced at the head's vast leprous surface, then turned to Marcia. "Are you all right?" he said.

"Yes, I'm all right, Les." She moved involuntarily toward him, but the creatures at her side tightened their grip, and she stopped short, wincing with pain.

"You will learn eventually," Joseph Strauss said, smiling without humor. "Now let us talk a moment. I bear you no ill-will, of course. Instead I wish to help you. We are in the presence of pure intelligence, and it understands everything we are saying, and every nuance in our intonation. It needs knowledge of Earth, and I am helping supply that knowledge. You too can be useful if you will forget your futile and emotional affection toward Earth."

"That was easy for you to do, obviously," Leslie said.

"I am not seriously affected by your sarcasm," Joseph Strauss murmured. "However, you are correct. I planned to come here, as you did. I guessed, as I presume you did, where the next silver square might strike. But my motives were different. You wanted what? A news story, perhaps. I wanted to avenge myself on Earth, and its systems of pious hypocrisy that masquerade as religion and government."

"Desist!"

THE SINGLE word struck Leslie's mind with sledge-hammer impact. Glancing at Joseph Strauss, he deduced that he had received the same silent command. Strauss was erect now, face impassive, staring at the head with mesmeric concentration.

"I am weary of your argument. I will tell you why I have brought you to my presence." Leslie knew that was meant for him. "This other creature—the female—has refused to be pliable. She holds a concept of you that is difficult for me to understand. The name you give it is love. She considers you in a manner that is sweet and tender and absurdly flattering. I do not see the attributes in you that cause this adoring reaction on her part. However, that is one of the things I need to know."

Leslie turned to Marcia. She met his gaze, her chin held high. "I've told nothing, Les. I don't care if I die. This thing is obscene and evil."

"How pointless. What is gained by dying?"

Leslie turned from Marcia as the head's thought came alive in his mind.

"I wonder that you are not reasonable, which is a way of saying, fatalistic. You gain nothing by refusing my demands. I can unveil your thoughts at any instant I wish, and study the materials of your mind at my leisure. However, that will not give me the clue to these curious inconsistencies of yours. Until I understand them I must be cautious in expanding my ideas about your planet. Look at it in this manner: the female will not tell me of Earth, although her defiance serves no good end. Further, I may destroy her for refusing to cooperate with me. Still she is adamant. This whimsical imbalance is beyond my immediate un-

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derstanding."

The head was silent a moment, its vast gray surface unmoving. Then the thoughts came again.

"You—the male—are involved with the female in this extremely involved thing you term love. Now you must tell her to speak to me of her life on Earth. When she complies with your command, one inconsistency will have been resolved. I will know that your positions are not inflexible, but are subject to pressure. Then I will merely have to find the right pressures to make all of you conform."

"She has her own decision to make," Leslie said.

Marcia struggled furiously within the embrace of the robot's whip-like arms, "I don't care what he tells me," she said hotly, facing the grotesque head. "I'll tell you nothing."

There was silence in the vast chamber. Then came the head's thought:

"You are unworkable until I find the lever that will bend you easily and inevitably to my design. I will have to apply various pressures in a process of elimination until I find the one which breaks your stubborn resistance."

Joseph Strauss smiled at Marcia. "Pain is the lowest common denominator of the emotions," he said.

The head's thought came: "Very well. I will determine whether or not her prejudices will melt in the crucible of pain. If not I will have to experiment with more refined pressures."

"You can't do that to her!" Leslie cried furiously.

He lunged desperately toward Marcia, but his movement was halted by a sledge-hammer blow of pain at the base of his skull. He collapsed with a moan and his last sight was of Marcia, white-faced and terrified, being jerked roughly away by the robot guards....

WHEN HIS consciousness returned that scene was foremost in his mind. He was lying in his cell. He got to his feet and paced the floor frantically. He had no way of knowing how much time had passed. Marcia might have been undergoing torture for weeks. She might be dead. He slammed a fist into the palm of his hand and cursed impotently.

Then, as if in answer to his needs, there came a faint tapping on the wall. Leslie dropped quickly to the floor and answered the signal. Then he pressed his ear to the wall and listened tensely.

The message came firmly, in one word.

"*Now*!"

There was nothing else. Leslie stood and faced the door. He waited for several moments and then his muscles tightened as he heard a sound beyond the door. The door swung inward and Leslie was staring at one of the bullet-shaped robots he had seen in the great chamber where the head rested. The creature returned his gaze with a blank metallic stare, and then stepped aside; and Leslie's jaw dropped as a small gray-haired man hurried into his cell, hand outstretched, a slight smile twisting his lips.

"Eaton's the name," he said. "Professor Eaton," he added, wringing Leslie's hand. "There's not much time for talk, so I'll give it to you fast. I've worked on this ever since we were jerked up here. Hypnotism, you know. That's the way he operates. I can handle two or three of these creatures of his now. Maybe more. The first year I got one of them to drop a food capsule, then a weapon. Next year I was able to move them around a bit. But I waited—"

"Good God, how long have we been here?" Leslie said.

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"Hard to tell, exactly." Professor Eaton said. "In the neighborhood of three years, at least. We've been under mental anesthetics between interviews. There aren't many left, of course. He kept me alive because he enjoyed talking with me. You too, I suppose."

Leslie caught the professor's arm. "How can I get to the head's chamber?"

"Impossible. We've got a chance to get away, if we work fast. We can get to one of the silver squares; they're space ships, of course."

"I've got to get to the chamber," Leslie said. "There's a girl there I—"

"You won't make it, of course," the professor said. He thought a moment, then shrugged. "A man should have the privilege of choosing his death. I can tell you how to get there, give you a weapon, but it won't work, you know." He took a tube from his pocket. "This is effective against the robots. I collected it from one of them I was able to control."

"And the chamber?"

"Very well. The years here have made me a fatalist, I believe. Go your way. I'll collect the few remaining humans and try to make the space ship. Should you, by some miracle, succeed, I'll tell you how to find us. Now take the first turn right off this corridor..."

Leslie raced along the last of the labyrinthine passages leading to the great chamber which was the nerve point of the rulers of Mercury. He made a dozen twisting turns as he followed the high gleaming corridors. He passed dozens of the bullet-shaped robots standing motionless at regular intervals along the passages.

Ahead of him loomed a vast arch, its apex disappearing in a blinding maze of refracting light. Below it were great doors of shining metal. He ran forward, his breath coming raggedly. He put his shoulder against the door and exerted pressure. The door began to open, swinging inward slowly.

The widening aperture gave him a view of the vast chamber. His breath caught harshly at the scene that met his eyes.

DIRECTLY before the dais the body of Marcia was suspended on a metal scaffold, and from above a blue light played over her palely glowing skin. She was spread-eagled helplessly, her wrists and ankles secured with gleaming wire.

The leprous surface of the head was twitching and undulating as Marcia's slender body strained against its bonds. Leslie could almost feel the secretions of evil malignancy emanating from the head.

The man called Joseph Strauss was at the foot of the dais, and two bullet-shaped robots were beside the scaffolding. As Leslie watched, he saw Marcia twist in agony, and her head moved helplessly back and forth as tremors shook her glowing body.

He shoved open the door and crashed into the vast chamber. He pressed the catch on the metal tube in his hand and pointed its end at one robot, then at the other. He did this as he raced toward the scaffolding, with no thought or hope in his mind of distracting the head from its ghastly purpose.

The robots staggered and then, incredibly, melted away before his eyes. Leslie flashed the tube upward, seeking the source of the light playing on Marcia's body. He saw a great blue disc near the domed ceiling, and pressed the catch on the tube. The light winked out; and Marcia's body slumped, unconscious, against its bonds.

Leslie wheeled toward the head. As he did so, a tremendous pressure grew

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in his skull. His brain felt as if it were being squeezed in a powerful vise. He shook his head like a groggy fighter. Splintered fragments of thoughts and commands rocked his consciousness.

But they were not complete or consistent. Leslie knew in the midst of his pain that his own all-consuming desire for vengeance was blocking the head's hypnotic power. For a long straining moment he stood before the dais, while sweat beaded on his brow and his muscles contracted in agony with the intensity of his effort.

There was nothing now in his mind but blind unswerving hatred. Hatred toward this monstrous ancient evil that existed for its own malignancy, like some hideous creature that nourished on its own venom.

Slowly Leslie raised the tube.

The pressure within him grew until a groan passed his lips. But his arm continued its slow ascent, the muscles struggling to respond to the commands of his raging will.

His wrist moved upward until the tube was pointed squarely at the gross aperture that split the leprous surface of the giant head.

He tried to tighten his finger on the tiny catch; but all his energy was draining off in his fight to hold the arm erect, to keep his brain free from the effects of the head's hypnotic power.

There was not enough strength in his body to move his finger an eighth of an inch, with a hair's breadth of pressure.

He stood immobile before the giant head, knowing in an agony of despair that he was beaten; that in a few seconds the terribly unequal fight would be over, that he would collapse in a faint.

Then from behind he heard a faint moan.

Marcia...

He choked back a cry. The thought that she had been chained up like some beast, tortured to satisfy the whim of this obscene deformity, was like a white-hot flame driving into his body.

Strength from some unknown reserve flooded into his arm. His finger closed on the catch.

FOR AN instant nothing happened. Then the scabrous skin of the head began to shrivel and a noxious odor spread sickeningly through the chamber.

The pressure faded from Leslie's mind, slowly, reluctantly, then was gone forever as the mighty head crumpled and dissolved in gray slime on the dais.

"You've destroyed it!" Joseph Strauss cried. "Intelligence, pure and refined and absolute, and you destroyed it! But it was only one! There are thousands like that here. I will find them, lend them my ability." He stared at Leslie with mad eyes. "I will find them," he cried and, wheeling, raced from the moon.

Leslie turned to the scaffolding and played the tube's ray on the wires that bound Marcia; and then, holding her close, walked toward the doors.

She hugged him tightly and opened her eyes. "I can walk," she said. "I'm —all right. It just started when you came in."

They passed through the great double doors and Leslie set Marcia on her feet. Then he heard a shout. Turning he saw the bounding, energetic figure of Professor Eaton hurrying toward him.

"It's gone, I know," he said, smiling. "I felt it the minute it left. The pressure in my head is gone."

"Yes, it's gone," Leslie said. "That miracle you mentioned must have happened."

"Come with me then, quickly. The

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If you have a body buried somewhere, don't read this story. You'll find yourself confessing—not from a guilty conscious, but by reason of . . .

A MORE POTENT WEAPON

By

Rog Phillips

FRANK SIMS felt among the dried leaves that covered the secluded spot until his fingers encountered the iron ring. Gripping it, he lifted carefully. Four square feet of innocent ground hinged upward. He reached with his other hand into the opening and brought out a stick, using it to prop the trapdoor up at a thirty-degree angle.

Two ordinary suitcases came out and were laid on the ground. Ten minutes later a strange-looking device had been assembled, one which would have been of great interest to the United States Government.

Frank carried it carefully, following a path that led to a little knoll at the edge of the woods. The knoll overlooked a stretch of rock-strewn ground at the base of a hundred-foot cliff.

At the highest point of the knoll Frank finished setting up the apparatus.

It consisted of at least a hundred small microphones in a frame that placed them in the surface of a concave lense. Fine wires connected all the microphones to a small cable that led to a portable radio of a standard make. The microphone setup was on a tripod which he had planted firmly in the shallow soil.

Frank Sims turned the radio on and waited until soft music began to whisper from the loudspeaker. Then he turned a knob and the music instantly shut off.

Now, he pivoted the microphone frame so that it focused on the face of the cliff, turning it experimentally here and there. Surprisingly, sensible sounds came from the radio. The sound of cars speeding along a road, growing loud and dying quickly as though they were very close. Abruptly, voices sounded. With an air of satis-

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faction, Frank stopped moving the tripod and listened.

The Government would have been very interested in what he was listening to. So interested that they would have possibly blown up the cliff, not to mention executing Frank Sims on the spot, because Frank Sims was actually Frank Semnovitch, and the United States and Russia had been at war for the past month. The voices coming so normally through the loud speaker of the portable radio originated two miles away on the heavily-guarded grounds of an atom plant.

At the particular spot where Frank was standing, the broad face of the cliff was throwing back the inaudible whispers of those voices, focusing them so that, though still inaudible to human ears, they could be picked up by the array of sensitive microphones and amplified to audibility through the amplifying section of the portable radio.

BUT, THOUGH Frank could hear ordinary conversation in the heart of the atom plant grounds, there was no way he could see those grounds. So all he could do was sit and listen, hoping that something might be said that would be of value to Russia....

"...drop over to dinner some evening, Jerry," Dr. Bowling said, unaware that his voice was being heard two miles away.

"Thanks, Dr. Bowling," Jerry Graham said vaguely. "I'd like to. Can't this evening though."

"Any evening," Dr. Bowling said. "Just let me know a few hours ahead of time so that I can tell the wife."

The phone on his desk buzzed. He turned away from the open window to answer it. A moment later he turned to Jerry.

"Let's go out to Pile Seven," he said. "Something strange going on. Sudden temperature drop of two degrees."

The two men hurried from the office, down the stairs and out onto the blacktop-covered grounds. They went past several squat concrete buildings to one that had the numeral seven painted on its windowless wall.

They entered a small lean-to structure huddled against the concrete-enclosed atom pile, and were immediately in a room filled with panels on which recording charts glistened.

The technician who had called them pointed wordlessly at one of the recording charts. The inker stood motionless on the chart. Originating under its point and forming a semicircle around the center of the paper dial was an inked line. The last quarter of an inch of the semicircle was of slightly smaller diameter than the rest. According to the time coordinates of the chart, the temperature of the atom pile had dropped unexplainably almost an hour before.

Now, as they stared at the chart, trying to guess what might have happened, the needle awoke from its motionlessness and slowly moved the almost inifinitesimal distance to bring it back to normal again.

And on the roof of the atom pile building, unnoticed, a small ball of brilliant white light, somewhat dimmed by competition with broad daylight, emerged from the tarred surface like a bubble breaking water, and floated upward, seemingly carried by the summer breeze....

"WATCH OUT, Alvin!" his wife screamed.

Her head banged against the windshield as Alvin straightened his leg against the brake pedal and twisted the steering wheel.

"God, I won't make it!" he breathed.

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The intense blue-white light bearing down on him on his side of the highway was suddenly blindingly close. He let go of the wheel and cupped his arms in front of his face in preparation for the inevitable crash.

The car seemed to leap upward. There was a screaming sound. He felt himself jerked forward. His chest hit the steering wheel painfully, seemed to bounce. Then he was sprawled over his wife and there was neither sound nor movement.

He lifted his head, waiting for the sharp pains of broken ribs. When they didn't come he braced a hand against the door and lifted himself up.

"Ohhhhh," Mary groaned from her doubled-up position.

Alvin sat up, expecting pains with every movement; pains that didn't come. Dazedly he began to realize the incredible: he wasn't hurt at all!

His eyes registered the fact that the windshield wasn't even cracked. The headlights still burned brightly, revealing tall stalks of corn ahead of the car.

He jerked around to look through the rear window. The blinding headlight that had made him swerve off the highway into the cornfield was still there. It was in the center of the pavement, turned so that the lone light still shone directly at him.

He squinted his eyes to see the car behind that glaring light. What he saw made him grunt in amazement.

"Ohhhh," Mary groaned again.

He looked down at her, out at the tall corn surrounding the car.

"Shut up, Mary," he said callously. "You aren't hurt."

"I'm not?" her voice came weakly. "I'm not?" It was outraged, indignant. Angrily, she sat up. Her anger was overcome by the realization that she had succeeded in sitting up. "I'm not!" It was amazement and relief.

"There's some kind of a damn light out there on the road," Alvin said.

He opened the car door and got out. The bright spot of light in the road cast as much illumination as a street lamp, revealing the tracks left by his car. Alvin glanced at the tracks whistling. The car had plunged off the concrete, up a steep three-foot embankment, and through a barbed wire fence, clearing the top strand of wire without breaking it.

HE RAN down the embankment to the edge of the highway and paused, squinting at the light. So far as he could see, there was nothing that it could be attached to. It hung stationary in the air about five feet off the pavement, lighting up the unoccupied concrete underneath it.

'What is it?" Mary's voice came from behind him.

"Damned if I know," he muttered. "Doesn't seem to be any bulb around the light."

He stepped out onto the pavement and walked slowly around it while Mary watched him. She saw him walk around the light, then approach it. He passed his hand over it and under it.

"Damn thing's just hanging here by itself!" he said. "Wonder how hot it is."

She saw him reach out cautiously toward it, ready to jerk his hand back.

"Careful, Alvin!" she said sharply. One of his fingers seemed to dissolve into the outer fringe of the bright light.

"Ain't hot at all!" he said.

Mary saw the light go into his hand, its bright rays crowding through his fingers and outlining the bones with red flesh.

"Got it!" Alvin said triumphantly. "Whatever it is, I've got it!"

He swung his hand in an arc. The thing stayed within his clenched fist, making the entire hand seem on fire.

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"Maybe it's radium!" Mary said fearfully.

"Nonsense," Alvin said. "Think anybody'd leave a million dollars worth of radium here on the highway? But maybe it's one of those new atom weapons, bounced out of some army truck that passed here. Doesn't seem to have any weight. Guess we'd better put it in something and take it along with us—if the car'll run. You stay here by the highway while I see."

He started up the embankment. Suddenly there was a muffled noise. Half a mile in the direction they had been driving a mass of billowing flames and smoke erupted, outlining trees.

Alvin stopped in his tracks and stared. He looked back at Mary.

"My God, another bomb," he said. "I hope the car runs."

He hurried to the car. It started immediately. He backed carefully. The strand of barbed wire the car had skipped over before broke as he went over it now.

On the highway once more, Mary climbed in beside him.

She blinked her eyes. "You can't hold that thing in your hand and see to drive," she said.

"I don't intend to. You hold it."

"Not me! Put it in something."

"The glove compartment," Alvin said. He popped open the door and pushed his fist in, spread his fingers, and pulled them out. "That'll hold the danged thing."

When he slammed the glove compartment door shut, light was spilling out from every crack and pinhole in it.

"Hurry," Mary said. "Someone up there might be hurt."

He started up, going slowly at first, then speeding up until he passed the trees. The flames were a gigantic mushroom of smoke and light. The highway went ahead straight until almost where the hidden source of the fire was, then turned sharply under the railroad.

A man stood in the middle of the pavement, flagging them down by waving his arms. Alvin slowed to a stop beside the man.

"What happened?" he asked, lowering the window.

"Accident," the man said. "My gasoline truck skidded when I was turning under the viaduct. It knocked me out. I came to and got up here just before the explosion. Good thing you didn't come along five minutes ago. You couldn't have seen the truck and would have ploughed right into it going under the viaduct."

Alvin and Mary looked at each other, then their eyes went slowly to the glove compartment with its brightly etched lines of radiant light.

"MORNING, JERRY," the waitress said to the young man frowning at the menu. "How's things over at the atom plant?"

"Morning, Helen," Dr. Gerald Graham said, looking up and smiling at the pleasant girl. "The atom plant? Fine. Just toast and coffee, please."

They both turned their heads toward the door as it burst open.

"Hear about the accident down the road last night?" the man who came in asked.

"What accident, Frank?" Helen asked.

"Gasoline truck folded under the viaduct ten miles south," Frank said. "Caught fire and blew up. Nobody caught in it, though. Hi, Jerry. How're the atoms this morning?"

"Never better, Frank," Jerry grinned. "Join me."

Frank sat down on the stool next to Jerry. "Coffee," he ordered. Then he glanced at Jerry shrewdly. "Haven't

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been losing any atom bomb materials lately, have you?

"Good heavens, no!" Jerry laughed. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I heard a rumor that some motorist picked up a chunk of plutonium on the highway half a mile beyond the viaduct where the gas truck blew up. Sort of a dumb fool, the motorist. He picked it up and carried it around in his hand. Even used it to flag down the two o'clock freight this morning. Now they've got him over at the hospital with a badly burned hand. The stuff didn't feel hot, and he was too stupid to know that radiation doesn't feel hot."

"Where's the stuff now?" Jerry asked sharply.

Frank shrugged. "In the glove compartment of his car. It's parked by the hospital. The cops have it roped off, but I got a peek. Looks like a flashlight left turned on in the glove compartment."

"You say it was laying on the highway half a mile beyond the viaduct?"

"Not laying," Frank said. "At least, this guy says it wasn't. He says it was floating in the air a few feet off the pavement. He thought it was the headlights of an oncoming car and ran off the road to avoid it. That was just before the explosion."

"That part at least is nonsense," Jerry said. "You say you saw something shining in the glove compartment?"

"Just the light spilling out through the cracks. The door was closed."

"Jerry," Helen called from the back of the cafe. "You're wanted on the phone."

"Police called the plant," Jerry explained when he returned from the phone. "They're sending out a truck to take care of the stuff. It'll be by to pick me up in a minute."

THE POLICE had a cordon around the parked sedan, holding back the ring of people to a distance of a hundred feet.

A moment after Jerry arrived in the police car, the truck from the plant drove up, looking very military with its army color and large numbers on the sides.

Jerry glanced at the equipment resting on the back of the truck and lifted his eyes in surprise. They had done a quick job of loading a remote control outfit on such short notice.

"I'll get in the control cubicle, then you back the truck to a position near the right hand door of that car," Jerry said. "I think I can open that door and the glove-compartment door and take the stuff out."

"Should I make the crowd get back farther?" the police captain asked.

"Just don't let them get any closer," Jerry said, swinging up onto the back of the truck.

He climbed into the small space of the control room. He saw it was a new remote control unit.

The arrangement of mirrors brought him a view of the outside. He noted with satisfaction that a lead block had been placed on the back of the truck, with a hollow in it for depositing the stuff, and a plug to seal it in.

When the truck had backed into position he began working the remote control arms, deftly opening the car door. A steel arm with delicate steel fingers opened the glove-compartment door, and abruptly Jerry's interest awakened. Brought to him via several successive mirrors was a brightly luminous object.

He carefully sent steel fingers about it and lifted it out. Two minutes later it had been safely sealed in the heavy lead block and the plug dropped over it.

He stepped out of the remote con-

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trol unit and jumped off the truck onto the hospital lawn. He went to the cabin of the truck.

"Did you bring a Geiger counter with you?" he asked the driver. The driver nodded and handed him a familiar small box. "Good!" Jerry said. "Take a police escort and go back to the plant. I'll be along later. I want to get this car off the street first."

As the truck started up, Jerry turned on the Geiger counter and pointed it at the car, placing the earphones over his head

He went slowly toward the car, listening to the slow clicks in the earphones. Finally he had the Geiger counter pointed directly into the glove compartment. The slow clicks in the earphones hadn't changed.

"No sign of radiation!" Jerry muttered.

He slammed the car door closed and looked around for the police captain. The captain came toward him.

"Have this car towed to the plant," Jerry ordered. "And have someone take me to the doctor in charge of that fellow who handled the stuff."

Fifteen minutes later he was closely inspecting Alvin's hand.

"You can see signs of radiation burns already," the doctor was saying.

"Must be," Jerry agreed. "But no sign of radioactivity on the hand." He shut off the Geiger counter and grinned absently at Alvin. "You'll have to stay here indefinitely," he said. "Your car is being taken to the atomic laboratories just outside of town. It may take several days before the full effects of the radiation burns come out." He turned to the doctor. "You'll keep us informed of developments?"

"READY?" Jerry said crisply. The several men around him nodded. Geiger counters were pointed at the block of lead from various distances. Movie cameras behind concrete shields were grinding away, ready to photograph the spectrum of the radiation from the mysterious object.

"O.K.," Jerry said. "I'll lift out the lead plug."

In the set of mirrors he watched the steel fingers under the pushbutton control panel in front of him lift out the cone-shaped plug.

When it was almost all the way out, light spilling out around it with glaring brilliance, he stopped the steel fingers.

"No radiation!" one man said unbelievingly.

Jerry touched a button. The lead plug dropped back, sealing the thing in again.

"Get those films developed," he ordered. "I want to see what the spectroscopic analysis shows."

Twenty minutes later he was comparing standard films with those that had just been developed

"Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbon, Lead," he said. He looked up at Dr. Bowling. "Have you noticed something peculiar about these shots? No deep reds."

"I noticed," Dr. Bowling said. "And nothing significant otherwise. Those lines are just the lines of the elements in the air and the lead from the block."

"That isn't significant?" Jerry said. "Did you ever hear of anything able to heat the air around it without throwing out radiation of its own? According to everything we know, this stuff must be composed of the elements the spectrum shows."

"Yes," Dr. Bowling said, "but according to everything we know, those spectrum shots are impossible. Nothing below the orange. It's cold light. And I'd guess there's five hundred watts of it, at least. Where does the energy come from, with no sign of radioactivity?"

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"Well," Jerry said, "we can perform another test. We can weigh the stuff."

Fifteen minutes later he and Dr. Bowling and the others studied the reading of the scales, mystified. They read a hundred and twenty-four pounds, fourteen ounces. The exact weight of the lead container as stamped on its outside.

"And another thing," Jerry said irrelevantly. "If it was shooting off five hundred watts of power, or even fifty watts inside that lead block, it would be heating it up." He placed his hand on the block. "It's positively cool," he said.

"You're right!" Dr. Bowling said, placing his own hand on the lead block. "It seems to defy everything we know."

"The condition of that tourist's hand ties in with what we've found out so far," Jerry said. "It seemed to be no more than badly sunburned. We've found that the thing emits no red or infrared radiation, and isn't radioactive." He stared at the silent faces around him. "And I can't get the thought out of my head," he went on, "that according to what that tourist said, he would have ploughed into the gas truck about the time it exploded if this thing hadn't made him stop."

"Are you implying the thing can think?" Dr. Bowling asked sharply.

"Well," Jerry grinned, "we've tried every other test. Let's give it an intelligence test!"

Dr. Bowling and the other technicians laughed.

"How are you going to do that?" Dr. Bowling asked.

"We can take it into one of the concrete rooms down in the basement of this building," Jerry said. "Then we can let it out of the lead case and see what happens. It should be easy to find out if its movements—if any—are directed or not."

"That would be a start, anyway."

"Jerry's right," one of the technicians said. "That would be a definite start."

"It sounds silly," Dr. Bowling said, "but—well, O.K.!"

Half an hour later, in a room with walls and doors of solid concrete with even an air renewer in it so that there would be no need of any sort of opening, Jerry lifted out the plug, setting the glowing center of light free.

Still holding the lead plug in his hand, he retreated quickly to the other side of the room with the other technicians, his eyes on the lead case from whose top light streamed in an intense blaze.

FOR SEVERAL long seconds nothing happened. Then slowly the cone widened. The ball of light came into view, emerging from the hollow space inside the block.

The ball of light seemed to be about two inches in diameter. It rose slowly straight up until it hovered a foot above the lead block.

"So far its movements aren't intelligent," Dr. Bowling said.

"They at least show the thing either has no weight or can defy gravity," Jerry said.

"Here, kitty, kitty, kitty," a technician said nervously, bringing a chuckle from the others. And the ball of light wavered slightly as though it too were laughing.

The laughter subsided. In the silence the light rose higher, seemingly drifting.

"You know," Dr. Bowling said worriedly, "this is an extremely risky business. We don't have the least idea what force is focused in that thing, but whatever it is it's atomic in nature, and there're radiations bathing us that we haven't measured. Hard radiations. How are we going to get

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it back in the lead container again?"

"Simple," Jerry said. "We've gone this far. I'll pluck it out of the air."

Without waiting for objections he went forward and reached for it. It evaded his clutching fingers gracefully.

"Simple!" one of the technicians taunted.

Jerry turned in the man's direction. "Why don't you try it yourself then?" he challenged. Suddenly, the faces watching him froze with surprise and horror.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"It's gone!" a voice croaked. "It went into your head!"

"What're you talking about?" Jerry said. He turned back to the ball of light. It had vanished. "Where'd it go?" he asked, searching about him.

"Into your head!" the technician shouted.

"Quiet down," Dr. Bowling's voice came calmly. "It couldn't have done that. What's happened is that it's burned out, whatever it was. If it had gone into Jerry's head he'd feel it."

"Sure," Jerry said, "and I don't feel a thing."

"I tell you it went *into* your head!" the technician insisted. "I saw it!"

"Nonsense!" Jerry said sharply. "What's happened is very simple. It has shut off its field. The light it produced was simply the effect of the repulsion field on atmospheric atoms, reversing their momentum relative to the field focus and transferring the energy of reversal into quanta of light."

"What gave you that idea?" Dr. Bowling asked sharply.

"Why—nothing," Jerry said. "It's obvious, isn't it? It wasn't radioactive, yet it produced light. The light was of the spectra of the atoms that should have been striking the focal area. The light originated entirely from impinging molecules, or supposedly impinging molecules. It's—it's as obvious as the nose on your face!"

There was a dead quiet.

"You say, '*it* has shut off its field' ", Dr. Bowling said gravely. "What is *it?*"

"Why—I don't know," Jerry said. "But if it had gone into my head I'd feel it, wouldn't I? And I don't feel anything."

"But it did. I saw it," the technician said earnestly. "And—you're *different* now." He stared at Jerry with eyes wide.

"MAYBE we'd better go back to the office," Dr. Bowling said abruptly. "And, Jerry, I'd like to see you alone for a minute."

"O.K.," Jerry said. "The rest of you run along. We'll be with you shortly."

The motor whined as the heavy concrete door opened.

"Jerry," Dr. Bowling said after the others had filed out. "I wanted to tell you that I—I played a dirty trick on my wife last Saturday night. I...well ...I may as well tell you the truth. My secretary and I, we've been sort of...ah...intimate, on occasion. It won't happen again. I'll square the whole thing with my wife just as soon as I get home tonight. Will you forgive me?"

"Huh?" Jerry said. "Will I forgive you?" He started to laugh, then saw the deadly serious expression on Dr. Bowling's face. "Of course, Dr. Bowling. I'll forgive you. Do you love your secretary?"

"Oh, no, no," Dr. Bowling said quickly. "I love my wife. It was just one of those things, you know." He laughed hollowly. "I knew it was wrong, of course, but now I realize I had to have your forgiveness, and also confess it to my wife and get her forgiveness. You really forgive me?"

"Sure," Jerry said, looking at Dr. Bowling queerly. "Of course I forgive

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you. Don't let it happen again though." He laughed self-consciously, but when he looked at Dr. Bowling there were tears in that man's eyes.

"Thank you, Jerry," Dr. Bowling said. "I can't tell you how happy you've made me."

"Let's go back to the office," Jerry said, his voice sounding both kindly and frightened at the same time.

Dr. Bowling dropped to one knee and seized Jerry's arm, kissing the sleeve. As quickly, he rose to his feet again and preceded Jerry out of the concrete room. Jerry followed and pressed the button that started the motor again to close the massive door.

The other technicians were waiting at the foot of the stair well, their faces pale and their expressions quite strange, Jerry noticed.

"Jerry," one of them said. Suddenly he burst into tears. "I've got to tell you, Jerry," he sobbed, "I'm wanted by the police in Grand Rapids. I stole three thousand dollars from a man and slugged him over the head. I just realized a few minutes ago that I must go back and confess and take my punishment—"

"I've been doing things wrong all my life," another broke in. "Jerry, I've just got to tell you about it and get your forgiveness. I—"

"I've done more wrong than anyone else," another spoke, raising his voice to drown out the others.

"All right!" Jerry screamed to make himself heard. "Shut up, everybody." Dead silence followed. "That's better," Jerry said more calmly. "What's wrong with everybody all of a sudden? What're you coming to me for with these stories? Have you all lost your minds?" He stared at the ring of faces defiantly. "I'd suggest..." An expression of glee crossed his face. "I'd suggest that you go back where you did wrong and confess to those to whom you did wrong—and do whatever is necessary to make things right. Don't waste any time at it, either. Get going. If you hesitate, you're lost."

"Oh, thank you, Jerry," a chorus of voices said. Tear-brightened faces smiled at him.

Jutting out his jaw he pushed through them, feeling their hands clutch at his coat. As he took the first stair step he glanced down and saw the last one kissing his coat as it slipped away from his fingers.

He reached the top of the stairs and stepped out of the building. He glanced at his watch; it was ten after twelve.

"Time to eat," he muttered uncomfortably.

HE STRODE across the grounds angrily and got in his car, slamming the door and gunning the motor as he backed out and headed for the gate.

The guard was trying to wave him down. Jerry saw the bright expression on the man's face and the eager way he waved.

"Oh, no!" Jerry muttered, speeding up and nearly running the man down.

Ten minutes later he strode into the cafe and walked to the back, sliding into an empty booth and slumping down. He saw Helen looking wide-eyed at him, but he kept his eyes turned away. He had a very uncomfortable premonition.

Out of the corner of his eye he watched her. He saw her glance down at the low neck of her uniform and reach up with a nervous hand to draw the collar together.

She picked up a menu, poured a glass of water and came toward him. He didn't look up when she placed the menu and the water in front of him.

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"Jerry," she said, her voice tender.

"Yeah?"

"I—I know I've done wrong. I love you, and I've been trying to get you to notice my—my figure. Please forgive me. I'm not...worthy of you. I see that now. All I want is your forgiveness, and the privilege of—of—"

"How about getting me a cup of coffee?" Jerry broke in. What was this? He was thinking wildly.

"Yes, Jerry," Helen said meekly, turning away with bowed head.

"And Helen," Jerry called her.

She paused, turned to face him almost timidly.

"I don't see anything about your body to be ashamed of," he said defiantly. "Take your hand off that damn collar."

HE STARED after her departing figure, then straightened his head to find that someone had slipped into the seat opposite him.

"I hope you'll forgive me for sitting here," the stranger, a rather portly man in a smart business suit, said deferentially. "But I've just got to get something off my chest. I own a factory on the south side of town. I've been—well, to put it bluntly, I've been defrauding the government of thousands of dollars."

"What's that got to do with me?" Jerry asked, irritated.

"I wanted to tell you, and make a clean breast of it," the man said. "I'm going from here to Washington and confess the whole thing and make some plan for restitution. First, I've got to have your forgiveness. Please. Do you forgive me?"

Jerry stared at the rabbit-like expression on the man's face, the eager hopefulness. He realized suddenly that this was probably the first time in many years that the man had been sincerely honest about anything.

"Sure, I forgive you," he said uncomfortably. "Go and—"

"Thank you, thank you!" the man said. He clutched Jerry's hand and leaned over the table, planting a wet kiss on it. When he raised his head there were real tears staining his flabby cheeks. He got up and left the cafe, dropping a bill at the cashier's cage and not waiting for his change.

"Here's your coffee, Jerry," Helen's meek voice sounded at his elbow.

"Look, Helen," Jerry said. "Sit down a minute. I want to talk to you."

She sat down opposite him, erect and with stars in her eyes. "Yes, Jerry?" Breathlessly.

"You say you love me and want to marry me?" he asked defiantly. She nodded mutely. "All right, I love you and want to marry you. This is a hell of a way to propose, but let's go out and do it this afternoon."

"Oh, that would be impossible!" Helen said.

"You want to marry me but it would be impossible?" Jerry said. When Helen nodded he went on, "What's the idea of leading me on then? If you're already married—"

"But I'm not!" Helen protested. "I'm just not—not worthy of you. That's all."

"Nuts," Jerry groaned. "You know something? I must be crazy. They say that when the rest of the world seems crazy it's always you, but you're the last to find out about it. That's me. I feel perfectly sane, but you're crazy, that crook that was just sitting where you are is crazy. Everybody at the plant is crazy. So the simplest answer is that I'm crazy."

"But you aren't," Helen said. "You're wonderful, g o o d, kind holy—"

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"That does it!" Jerry said. "If there's anything I hate, it's being kicked upstairs. Come over here and sit beside me."

"Yes, Jerry," Helen said meekly. She got up and slid in the booth beside him.

"Kiss me," Jerry ordered.

She lifted her face. He kissed her fiercely. Her lips remained limp under his.

"Kiss me!" he said angrily. Her lips responded.

When he drew away, tears were spilling from her eyes. There was a radiant smile on her lips. But her eyes were staring far away.

"Do you still think you're not good enough for me?" he asked angrily.

"Oh, yes!" she murmured. "I will always remember the divine bliss of this moment, my love."

"But you won't marry me?" Jerry said.

Helen shook her head dreamily. "How could I when I'm not worthy—"

"Shut up!" Jerry said. "I'll be back when you come to your senses—or I do," he added worriedly.

He pushed her gently out of the booth and got up. Without a backward glance he strode out of the cafe.

"BUT I DON'T want any money!" the grocer said. It was half an hour later. Jerry had tried three different cafes and given up. He stared at the grocer, his sack of groceries in his arm.

"Look, mister," he said. "I don't want any trouble with you. Just add up what I owe you and let me pay it."

"But I couldn't!" the grocer said. "Do you smoke?" He grabbed several assorted brands of cigarettes off the shelf and started to put them in a sack.

Jerry planted a five-dollar bill on the counter and fled to his car. When he drove away the grocer was running out into the street, waving the money and trying to call him back.

"If this keeps up," Jerry mumbled to himself, "I'll be very glad to get locked up in a booby hatch."

He turned his car on the road. He knew he was going to be late getting back to the plant, but he had decided to stop somewhere under some trees, eat a can of sardines and some cheese, and drink some milk.

Five minutes later he was parked in the shade of trees, the nose of his car peeking over the embankment leading down to the river.

He emptied the groceries on the seat beside him, flattened the sack and laid it on his lap. He opened the sardines and spilled them onto a slice of bread.

He bit into the sardine sandwich, laid it down, and picked up the container of milk to open it.

Suddenly his eyes focused on the rear-view mirror. He swallowed loudly. Then, drawn as though by a magnet, yet resisting, he moved over in the seat to a spot where he could see his own reflection.

"God!" he breathed.

Reflected from the mirror was his own face, yet surrounding his head was a band of soft light. A halo.

"Funny," he said weakly. "I don't feel any different."

He sat eating his lunch, a thoughtful frown on his face.

"I won't go back to the plant today," he decided suddenly.

He chewed some more, his eyes studying the surface of the river.

"I'll call Helen and then pick her up," he decided.

Starting the motor, he backed up and turned around. He turned away from town, driving toward a highway

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pay phone he knew about.

"Helen," he said quickly when he got her on the phone. "This is Jerry. I've got to talk to you. Right away. Get into your street clothes and be standing on the curb. I'll be by in front of the cafe in twenty minutes."

"But—" Helen's anguished voice sounded in the phone. After a brief silence she said, "All right, Jerry. I'll be waiting."

He hung up and started out of the phone booth. There was a click. From force of habit he glanced in the coin return slot. His dime had been returned to him.

"Even the darn phone won't take my money!" he grumbled.

HELEN WAS standing at the curb when he drove up. He pulled up just long enough for her to climb in, gunning the motor and starting again before she had time to close the door.

He drove several blocks without speaking. Helen sat quietly, her eyes straight ahead.

"I just discovered this halo I'm wearing," Jerry said abruptly.

"You—you sound like you resent having it, Jerry," Helen said. "Why?"

"A lot of reasons," Jerry said bitterly. "For one, I don't feel any different. I don't feel like a saint, and I resent being treated like one. I don't like strangers walking up to me and spilling their—their secret sins, and wanting me to forgive them. Who am I to forgive anybody?"

He stared at her defiantly.

"Another good reason," he went on more soberly, "is that here I've been trying to work up courage to ask you for a date, and what happens? You're forced to confess you love me. Not only that, you immediately feel you have to be so good that it would be a sin to make love to you. And you start in with that nauseating line that you aren't worthy of me."

"I'm not worthy of you," Helen said. "You're a saint now."

"I'm not either!" Jerry said. He darted her a grin. "I'm a devil, and I want to keep on being one." His grin changed to a fierce frown. "But how the heck can I if everyone treats me like a saint?"

"Maybe you'll get used to it after a few days," Helen said.

"Not as long as you keep thinking you aren't worthy of me," Jerry said darkly. "I'll do something desperate. Steal something. I'm not going to do anything else until I've made you get over your feeling that you aren't worthy of me."

"But I can't help it, Jerry," Helen pleaded. "And it's a good feeling. I'll marry you—if you want—"

"If I want!" Jerry groaned. "Do you think I want that kind of a wife? An obedient slave who thinks she's lucky to lick my boots? What do you think I am? A stuffed shirt? I want a dame who has spunk enough to get tough with me, to play with me, fight with me."

"I'll be that too, if—" she bit her lip.

"If I want," Jerry groaned. "Oh, no. I'm going to drop you off back at the restaurant and go to the plant and find a way to get rid of my halo."

JERRY STOOD in the center of the room looking around vaguely. It was the same underground room in which the ball of light had entered his head. He had come here hoping that he might get some inspiration on how to get rid of the thing and seal it up in the lead container again.

The door was locked so that he wouldn't be interrupted. His breath was still coming a little faster than normal from the ordeal of escaping

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guards and technicians who had wanted to bare their souls to him.

"There must be some way of getting rid of the darn thing, I hope," he muttered. Then, "Damn!"

The phone was ringing. He had disconnected the door buzzer but had forgotten the phone. He started to pull it loose from its connecting wires, then hesitated.

"Maybe I'd better answer it or they'll be breaking in," he grumbled. He picked it up. "Hello?"

"Dr. Gerald Graham?" a strange voice asked.

"Yes," Jerry said.

"This is Major Walters," the voice sounded. "I've just arrived and been informed of the situation. I tried to get you to open the door, but you refused to answer the buzzer."

"It would be far better if you didn't see me," Jerry said. "Get more fully acquainted with the situation before you do."

"I gather," Major Walters' voice said cautiously, "that some strange ball of light was the cause of the present disruption of activity here. It somehow entered your head, and now you seem to have a strange effect on people. Is that right?"

"Right," Jerry said. "Now I'm trying to figure out some way to get rid of the thing. Can you feel it over the phone?"

"What am I supposed to feel?" Major Walters said.

"Some kind of an urge to confess your sins to me, I guess," Jerry said. "At least, that's the way it's affected everyone else."

"So I gather," Major Walters said dryly. "No, I don't feel such an urge."

"Thank God," Jerry said. "One sane one in the batch. Maybe you can help me. Over the phone," he added hastily. "Apparently your not seeing me has kept you from feeling the urge."

"O.K.," Major Walters said. "For the present I'll let you stay where you are, alone. We can discuss the problem over the phone and see if any progress can be made. Do you have any idea what the ball of light was?"

"None whatever," Jerry said. "You've heard, I suppose, that it was picked up on the highway leading into town by a tourist, and that we took it from the glove compartment of his car."

"Yes, I've learned that," Major Walters said. "I thought you might have some idea of its origin. Could it have originated here at the atom plant? Its being found so close lends credence to that belief."

"Not unless some freak of nature produced it," Jerry said. He drew in his breath sharply. "Wait a minute. Yesterday, something unexplained happened. One of the atom piles—number seven—dropped two degrees in temperature for an hour, then returned to normal."

"And this ball of light showed up last night," Major Walters said slowly. "Could be a connection."

"The thing wasn't radioactive," Jerry said, "but that doesn't mean a thing."

"No, it doesn't," Major Walters said. "I wonder if some kind of electronic beam might not have an effect on it?"

"While it's inside my skull?" Jerry said. "Over my dead body!"

"It might come to that, Dr. Graham," Major Walters said. "There's a war on, and this is a highly important scientific development."

"Well, at least give me a chance to try to get the thing out in the open," Jerry said nervously.

"I intend to," Major Walters said. "I'll cooperate with you. Leave your

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receiver off the hook so we can hear what goes on down there. If you need help just shout. Meanwhile, unlock the door. I'll see that no one enters. I have my own men here. Men who haven't seen you and aren't trying to confess their sins to you."

CIGARET stubs measured the hours as Jerry alternately paced the floor and sat at a desk doodling and writing figures. At times he tried to think of some way of dislodging the ball of light from inside his skull; at others he reviewed the known theories of atomic breakdown in an effort to find some clue to the origin of the thing. In neither line of endeavor did he advance one inch.

After a long time he became aware of something new developing. It was a faint urge to get out of the place. He decided it was a natural enough urge. Slowly it grew stronger. Finally he discovered that it was an urge to have people confessing to him.

With a sense of horror he realized that the urge must originate with the ball of light rather than with himself. He went to the phone and got Major Walters, explaining this new development. They agreed between themselves that it would be wise to lock him in from the outside so that he couldn't become a victim of that urge.

A few moments later the major called him to the phone by whistling over it loudly.

"You're locked in now," he informed Jerry.

Immediately after, the urge to get out departed. Jerry got the major on the phone again.

"That's interesting, Doctor," Major Walters said. "It indicates that the thing may have a mind of a sort."

"Not necessarily," Jerry said. "It's more probably the effect of the thing on my brain. I've read of experiments where brain tissue was subjected to mild irritation, giving rise to thought. I believe this whole thing is more the effect the thing has on my brain than any effect it has directly. Now that I think of it, its entering my skull may be due to some property of the calcium globe of my skull instead of some affinity for the mind."

"It could be as simple as that, all right," Major Walters agreed. "Its presence in your brain may have awakened some dormant property of the brain that makes people confess their sins to you."

"Exactly," Jerry said. "I think that's the way we should look at it." He was silent for a long minute. "I want to try something," he said finally. "If it's attracted by some field property of calcium, maybe I could coax it out by placing a greater mass of the stuff near me. Sort of displace the center of the field."

"I catch," Major Walters said. "I'll scare up some somewhere. Any particular form?"

"It might as well be the same form as my skull," Jerry said. "Get a big bag of ground-up bones or bone dust. A fertilizer store might have some."

An hour later he dragged the bag of bone meal through the door and went to the phone.

"O.K.," he said. "I'm back in again."

He stood looking down at the bag of bone meal while he heard the door being locked again from the outside.

Slowly, strange lights began to interfere with his vision. He turned his head away from the bag of bone meal. The swirling lights died down.

Triumphantly he went to the phone. "I believe that's it," he said to the major. "When I was looking at the bag of bone meal I began to see swirling lights. That could be because the ball of light moved toward the

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front of my skull near the optic nerves."

"Good," Major Walters said. "Why don't you try placing your head against the sack? Maybe that would draw it out completely."

"I'll try," Jerry said, turning his head to look in the direction of the sack. He stopped. The ball of light was hovering above the sack, slowly settling toward it.

Dropping the phone, he leaped toward it, wrapping his fingers about it wrecklessly. With rays of light escaping between his fingers he carried the thing over and put it back in the lead container.

"I did it!" he exclaimed hysterically over the phone. "I did it! It's back in the lead container with the plug holding it in. I'm rid of it!"

"SO THAT'S it," Major Walters said as Jerry lifted out the lead plug and let the ball of light drift gently out into view. "Innocent-looking little monster, isn't it."

"And one of the greatest finds of science," Jerry said. "There isn't much doubt but what it was created by some freak nuclear field in Pile Seven. Or maybe not such a freak. Just something very rare."

He deftly caught the ball of light and placed it back in the lead container, dropping the lead stopper over it to seal it in.

"Let's leave it here and go upstairs," Major Walters said. "I'll post a guard at the entrance to this laboratory."

Ten minutes later they were in Dr. Bowling's office. A very subdued Dr. Bowling.

"How do you feel, Jerry?" the director of the atom plant asked anxiously. "Do you remember everything that happened while you had that thing?"

"Perfectly."

Dr. Bowling walked over to the window, keeping his eyes on the hills two miles away perched above the cliff that formed their base.

"That ball of light—energy—or whatever it is," Major Walters said, "apparently didn't damage your brain tissue at all."

"No," Jerry said. "It was right inside my brain for several hours without the slightest damage—or I'd be dead by now."

"The way I see it," Major Walters went on, "powers latent in the normal human mind were brought out. Did it change *you* in any way that you could feel?"

"No," Jerry said. "I remained just as I always was. My guess is that it awakened some telepathic property of the mind that affected other people, but not me."

"This can become a potent weapon," Major Walters said. "As soon as we know more about it, we may be able to discover how it came into existence in that atom pile."

"I already have some ideas on the subject," Jerry said. "Ordinary particles are a center of fixed mass surrounded by a field. I think in some way that central mass has been converted to pure field, so that we have the first total conversion of mass to energy. It takes the form of a field without a central nucleus, but still centering about a mathematical point. That would account for its not harming my brain structure, and might also account for its changing me into a superman, so to speak. Telepathy would have to be a field effect of brain matter. Probably it acted merely as an amplifier of already existing brain-waves, rather than bringing out some dormant property of the brain."

"Whatever happened," Dr. Bowling said from the window, "I can testify

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to the fact that it has a remarkable effect on those around the one possessing it. It makes them... vulnerable."

"If it's all right with you two," Jerry said, "I'm going to call it a day. I'm worn out."

"We'll all call it a day," Major Walters said. "The thing is safe enough in that laboratory under this building. Tomorrow further study of it can be begun."

He went to the office door and opened it, standing aside while Jerry and Dr. Bowling went out, then followed them. In the hall, he chuckled. A new type of war weapon—one which made people feel their sins and turn over a new leaf."

JERRY parked his car in a vacant spot near the restaurant and climbed out. There was a worried frown on his face. He was wondering if Helen would still feel unworthy of him. Dr. Bowling had behaved as though he definitely regretted having confessed his intimacy with his secretary. Maybe Helen would be embarrassed about her confession of loving him while under the influence of that ball of light.

He pushed open the door of the restaurant and walked in. The supper crowd was mostly gone. Barely a dozen customers were in the place. Helen, busy waiting on them, didn't see him. He went toward the back and sat down in a booth and waited.

Dirty dishes still rested on the table. Someone had left the afternoon paper. Jerry searched through the crumpled paper for the front page.

War news took up most of the page. It was mostly bad. The Russian-occupation area in Canada had expanded on all fronts several miles during the past twenty-four hours. The battle, involving over thirty thousand American tanks and at least an equal number of enemy tanks, was spread along a thousand-mile front. The radar network around Puget Sound had been deepened fifty miles to compensate for the increased velocity of the new Soviet-guided missiles, so that counter missiles could still rise in time to meet and destroy them.

On an inside page a war analyst discussed the possibility of Soviet forces' dropping paratroopers in various parts of the country to establish occupied islands from which to spread their hold. They were already doing that in eastern Canada, just as the United Nations forces were doing in agarian parts of Russia.

"Hello, Jerry." He looked up. It was Helen, carefully avoiding his eyes as she picked up the dirty dishes.

"Hi, honey," he said, grinning. "Have you noticed? I don't wear a halo any more."

"Yes, I noticed," she said, still not looking at him.

"Well," he said, "does it improve your attitude toward me? Have you gotten over your feeling of being not worthy of me?"

"That left me an hour ago—suddenly," she said.

Jerry studied her averted eyes.

"Oh, I get it," he said. "You're feeling ashamed of yourself. Well, don't! All that's as if it never was. It wasn't you, anyway, but that darned field of energy. Forget it. I have."

SHE TURNED her eyes on him briefly, then scurried away with her armload of dishes. He grinned at her back. All he had to do was give her time.

"Hi."

Jerry looked around at the newcomer.

"Oh. Hi, Frank," he said. "How're things?"

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"O.K., Frank said. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Come ahead," Jerry said.

Frank glanced at the paper as he slid into the seat opposite Jerry's.

"War news looks bad," he said conversationally. "I look for the commies to drop paratroopers right here. Almost any minute."

"Why?" Jerry asked. "It's quite a way from their beachhead in Canada. Too risky."

Frank shrugged indifferently. "Find out anything about that ball of light you got out of that tourist's car this morning?" he asked, his eyes blandly innocent.

"Nothing yet," Jerry said calmly.

"Hello, Frank," Helen said as she came up to the booth. She looked at Jerry, her eyes glowing, and wrinkled her nose mischievously. She was all right again, Jerry decided, noting her tantalizing neckline.

When she left, going toward the kitchen, Jerry slid out of the booth and stood up. "Be back in a minute, Frank," he said. "Got to get something out of the car."

He left the restaurant and hurried to the corner drugstore.

"Hi, Joe," he said to the soda fountain boy, going down the aisle to the bank of phone booths.

"MAJOR WALTERS?" he asked. When the answer was yes, he breathed a sigh of relief. "Good. I've been calling all over trying to get you. Listen. I've got a hunch. The Ruskies are going to try to get that ball of light."

"They can't very well, unless they drop paratroopers here and succeed in occupying—"

"I know that," Jerry said. "I think they're going to try. Tonight."

"What makes you think so?" Major Walters said.

"A hunch," Jerry said.

"Don't give me that," Major Walters said. "You're too much a man of science not to realize that hunches, if they have any basis in fact, stem from subconsciously known data and reasoning. You know something. Out with it."

"Nothing definite," Jerry said. "Just a slip of the tongue by an acquaintance. It might not be that at all, but it's possible, and I'd rather not give you his name. I'd hate to have a man lose his life as a spy on the strength of it."

"Let's see," Major Walters said, thinking aloud. "We have quite a few defenses here. Not enough to prevent a full-scale air landing, perhaps. But it could be accomplished—tonight."

Muffled by the walls of the telephone booth, the sound of air-raid sirens was born and began rising in wailing crescendo.

"You hear that?" Jerry said. "I was right!"

"It may be only a raid," Major Walters said. "But we can't take any chances. You just forget about it. We'll handle things."

"I'll be at the restaurant where I always eat," Jerry said. "It's—"

"I know where it is," Major Walters said. "Only you'd better get to the nearest air-raid shelter. Goodbye. I can get you if I need you."

Jerry hung up and left the drugstore. Back in the restaurant he slid behind the table and grinned at Frank.

"Find it?" Frank asked.

"Huh?" Jerry said. "Oh. No, I guess I left it at work. Wasn't important anyway."

"Better eat," Frank said. "We've got to get out of here soon. If it's a bunch of paratroopers, this may be our last square meal for a while."

"Yeah," Jerry mumbled through a mouthful of food.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 130

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ASK ME NO

By Mack Reynolds

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QUESTIONS!

They knew that the Martians were in the drug business on Earth. They wanted to know why — and strangely, so did the Martians!

And oft though wine has played the infidel,
And robbed me of my robes of honor, well,
I wonder often what the vintners buy
One half so precious as the stuff they sell.

—Omar

THEY'D chosen me to interrogate our Martian prisoner, not because I'd had any more experience than the others, but largely due to my research in 20th Century novels and films. Then too, I suppose, my scorn of cosmetic surgery might have had something to do with it. I've never even had my beard permanently removed and for this occasion I had let it grow several days so that my face would look as brutal as possible.

I'd rehearsed for hours, running over again motion picture films of the mid-20th Century. I had my props at hand and thought I was as ready as I'd ever be.

After the kidnapping—the first such crime in more than two and a half centuries—they'd brought him immediately to the small suburban underground house which we'd used for our base for the past six months. It was a comfortable enough establishment, typical of the neighborhood, but we'd altered one room in preparation for him; barren except for a small table and a battered chair to which he was tied, it looked as much like the den of a gang of thieves as we could make it.

He was allowed to remain there, bound and gagged, and—we were

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hoping—terrified, for several hours. Then I entered.

I had a cigarette dangling from the side of my mouth. I let the smoke spiral upward from it, and refrained from puffing. For one thing, that's the way they did in the films; for another, I was afraid it would make me deathly ill. Tobacco is used only in some of the most isolated spots of Terra, and only by those who are as yet unacquainted with *dwarr*, or Martian Poppy as it is usually called.

I sat on the edge of the table and looked at him, cold faced, emotionless; trying to appear vicious. Finally, I took the cigarette from my lips and ground out the burning tip in the palm of my left hand. Doctr Gardnr, one of our group, had prepared the palm earlier with resin, but, of course, the Martian didn't know that. His antenna twitched as he saw me extinguish the stub on what seemed bare flesh.

Still not taking my eyes from his face, I reached my hand into my jacket under my left arm and brought forth the revolver. I'd been practicing handling the horrible thing for several days, but I was still clumsy at it; however, it was unlikely that he'd know the difference.

I reached over and pulled the gag from his tiny mouth and stuck the muzzle of the revolver to within inches of his face.

"Know what this is?" I growled.

He shook his head in negation.

THAT WAS something to be thankful for. He'd been kidnapped at random; at least we'd picked one that knew Amer-English even well enough to be familiar with our gestures.

"No," he said, his tone wistful, as is always the case with Martians; invariably they look and speak as though they'd just received news of their mother's death.

"It's a gat," I told him, trying to work an element of the sinister into my voice, "a rod."

His antenna flinched, and his melancholy eyes went a deeper green. "You mean ith a weapon? he lisped unbelievingly.

I waved the muzzle near his face. "That's right, pal," I said from the side of my mouth. "Pretty hard to come by now, but just as lethal as ever." I gestured with it. "Now this just happens to be a .358 Magnum; one of the deadliest hand-guns the ancients made; great favorite with the boys back in the old days. I picked it up in a museum. Watch!"

I leveled it at the far wall, turning my back to him so he wouldn't be able to see me close my eyes, and pulled the trigger.

In reconstructing the ancient weapon from diagrams in publications of the time, we'd had to make various improvisations. For one thing, we hadn't been able to decide whether or not the pellets, or bullets, the things threw exploded upon contact. We decided they did but that it would be a mistake for us, perhaps an injurious one, to try and copy that feature. Instead, Franz Mect, one of the engineers of our group, volunteered to conceal a small explosive in the wall of the chamber in which we were going to question our prisoner. In this manner, we planned to simulate the effect of the gun, rather than go through the actual experience.

At any rate, the results were gratifying. The revolver jumped in my hand and made a slight noise; Franz, stationed at a peephole, ignited the explosive in the wall; the wall exploded and when the dust cleared there was a hole large enough for a man to walk through.

I turned back to the Martian and nonchalantly returned the revolver to the holster under my arm.

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"We mean business, pal," I [illegible] at him. "Now then, are you going to talk, or do I have to go to work on you?"

"I'm thor I don't know what you mean," he lisped, obviously shaken, but still defiant.

I laughed hoarsely, sneeringly. "Why do you Martians sell *dwarr* here on Terra?"

A deeper fear showed in the wilting of his antenna, and his eyes went green as emerald.

THE VARIOUS Terran governments had already established two or three Space Stations, revolving around our planet at varying distances and had sent several expeditions to Luna at the time of the arrival of the first Martian spacecraft. Had the Martians waited even another two or three years, we would have visited them first, although it's unlikely it would have made much difference.

From the first, intercourse between the two planets was on the friendliest plane. The Martians, somewhat smaller and more delicate than the Terrans in appearance, were approximately equal intellectually; the slightly higher I.Q. enjoyed by the humans being offset by the antiquity of the Martian civilization.

They had been receiving our radio emanations for generations and had painstakingly managed to decipher our means of communication to the point that even their first explorers to land among us were able to speak not one, but several of our languages. That, of course, was before Amer-English had become universal on Terra.

During the first decades of our relationship with the sad eyed, lisping life forms from Mars, we earthlings had profited greatly as a result of their suggestions and assistance in various fields. World government was established, for one thing, and a stable socio-economic system. Various fundamental diseases were wiped out and earth entered a new era of health and prosperity.

Trade between the two planets consisted principally in exchange of techniques, although there was considerable interest in each other's art forms. In fact, the dream art of Mars became exceedingly popular overnight on Terra, and the Martians became quite intrigued with Terran music, especially the more primitive types such as Calypso.

Conflict between the Martians and ourselves was unthought of, especially after the first half century of relations with them. War on Mars itself had been eliminated so many millenniums before that even the historic accounts of their conflicts were lost in antiquity, confused with legend; and with the establishment of the World Government, it became impossible on our own planet. Weapons soon became as illegal and unknown on Terra as they had been for centuries on Mars.

Seemingly, we were set for an indefinite period of peace and friendly relations with the only other planet in the Solar System which supported intelligent life.

Perhaps that last is misleading. According to the Martians, there was life on Venus, but it was hostile, backward, and living conditions on the planet so impractical for either Terran or Martian, that after one or two half-hearted attempts, we gave up our efforts to communicate with them. Perhaps, we reasoned, in a few thousand years they would have developed on their own to the point where they could take their place with Mars and Earth in a three way relationship as satisfactory as that between the two of us.

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It is unknown, exactly, when the Terran use of *dwarr* first began. Introduced on a small scale in the beginning, its use grew only infinitesimally. It was decades before its spread had reached the point where it was investigated—discreetly, of course, since its source was Mars and we had no wish to cast aspersions on our friendly neighbors in the sky.

IT WASN'T a narcotic; not in the ordinary sense of the word. The use of narcotics on Terra had disappeared except for medicinal reasons, long years before. But *dwarr* did have a good many of the effects of the opium poppy of long ago.

It wasn't habit forming, there was no known case of a person becoming addicted, but it did lead to a dream world that was utterly desirable. In the early stages of its use—it was usually taken in beverage form—it wasn't much more effective than tea, or coffee, those mild narcotics of yesteryear. It gave a slight *lift*. As the user continued to indulge, however, the effect became stronger and after a period of years the use of *dwarr* led to a dream world beyond anything accomplished with opium or even hashish.

Dwarr had the ability to select each person's most inner desires and give him realization of them. Were you a would-be poet, your *dwarr* inspired dreams had you writing sonnets that put Shakespeare and Spencer to shame; were you a scientist, *dwarr* had you conquering the problems of the universe. Were you a lover, *dwarr* gave you hours far more beautiful than Mohammed had ever conceived in his paradise for the faithful.

There seemed to be no physical or mental after effects to condemn the Martian Poppy. A *dwarr* drinker could be taken from its use for any period and never feel the worse for it, except, of course, a desire to enjoy its pleasures again as soon as it was possible.

The most thorough investigation showed no injurious effects as a result of the beverage's use, and the government dropped its probe of what some had feared a dangerous narcotic.

Fifty years later, half the population of Terra used *dwarr* and another investigation into its nature took place. There were still no signs that either mental or physical damage was done by its continual use, and eventually the second government investigation was dropped as had been the first.

Our friendly relations with Mars continued; we exchanged scientific developments, we traded our art objects. And they sent us *dwarr* in return for titanium which was evidently almost unknown on their planet. Several attempts were made to grow the Martian Poppy in Terran soil, but they were unsuccessful; its use continued to depend upon our Martian friends.

The final government investigation into the use of *dwarr* was made approximately one hundred years ago, and was less successful even than previously. Perhaps this was due to the fact that for all practical purposes *all* Terra was now using the beverage. Even those who investigated its use were enamored of it; and the bare news that such an investigation was taking place had been enough to bring waves of protest from all earth. The probe was dropped.

Scientific development lagged, art came to a standstill, ambition was a thing long dead; but the use of *dwarr* continued, increased, expanded.

We were the only ones, our little secret society consisting of perhaps twenty persons in all—what in yesteryear might have been called an un-

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derground—who fought the Martian Poppy. Convinced that some sinister purpose was behind its distribution to earthlings, we conducted our study of *dwarr* quietly, determinedly. This kidnapping and interrogation of the Martian trader was the culmination, thus far, of our efforts. From him we must wrest crucial answers, if the fight was to continue.

"I'M THOR I don't know what you mean," the little Martian lisped.

I rasped out a laugh, then sneered down at him. I took from a pocket a small clasp knife, another relic from the museums, pressed a button on its side and let the blade flick out only a fraction of an inch from his throat.

"Maybe you need some persuasion," I growled, wondering if I sounded authentic, and wondering how Doctr Gardnr and the rest who I knew were peering through peekholes in the door and walls, were taking it.

The very thought of imposing physical violence upon another, turned my stomach slightly, but I must never let him know this. Everything depended upon his believing his life was in danger.

I let the light flicker on the knife blade. "You're going to talk, Martian," I told him coldly, "or you're going to go through something you never knew still took place here on Terra; something our government's kept secret from you." I laughed bitterly. "Probably ashamed of it."

His antenna twitched and his eyes went from aquamarine to emerald in apprehension. "You . . . m e a n . . . torthur?" he lisped, shocked.

I whetted the blade on the palm of my hand. "Torture is right, pal." I put the point to the base of his thin neck. "Now talk, or else," I grated.

I have never seen such living fear as that reflected in every facial expression, in every twitching movement of the thin framed, wistful appearing little Martian. I was afraid for a moment that his mind would crack under the pressure, and told myself I should have known better than to have gone so far.

There has been no war, no crime, no physical violence on earth for at least two centuries. From earliest childhood, in our schools, in our homes, our books, our means of entertainment, we are taught to abhor violence. But while it has been so on Terra for two centuries, it has been so on Mars for at least twenty.

It was the very shock effect, that we were depending upon.

His sad face was rigid with alarm, and his voice tight—it undoubtedly would have been shrill were Martians capable of inflection. I let the blade touch his throat, gently.

"Yeth, *Yeth!*" he lisped, "I'll tell you whatever you wisth to know."

Victory!

I leaned back and considered him, as though I was sorry he hadn't given me the opportunity to work on him with the knife. "Okay, pal," I growled, "Wait'll I call in some of the other boys."

I went to the door and stuck my head out into the hallway. Doctr Garnr was there and Franz Mect and two or three of the others. The rest were about the house or scattered around the neighborhood on watch to warn us in case of emergency. The penalty, if our crime was detected, would be sur-amnesia, the equivalent of death, although, of course, our bodies would continue to live supplied with a new personality to replace that which society had rejected as injurious to the majority.

The others came in and stared as coldly as possible down on the little

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Martian trader, seated there in his bonds. They attempted to carry on the atmosphere I'd created, but modern cosmetic surgery makes it difficult for a person who has chosen to be made godlike in appearance to look sinister.

I jerked my thumb at the Martian. "He'll talk," I rasped, returning the knife to my pocket. I brought out the revolver again and trained it on his chest.

Doctr Garnr began softly, "In the past, here on Terra, we put our souls, our desires, into many things; into ambition, into investigation of the mysteries of science, into the arts, into love, into good food and good drink, and into a myriad of other things that made life worth the living.

"But what do we have *now?*—Why should we value the work of a master chef when we can eat garbage and afterward take *dwarr* and feast on the food of the gods? Why should we love a beautiful woman when *dwarr* will give us a beauty a thousand times greater. Why should we attempt any ambition, when your Martian Poppy concedes us any desire, any pleasure?"

THE MARTIAN sat, a picture of pathos, his eyes still shining green with fear and his eyes going from the doctor to my revolver and back again.

"Why do you sell *dwarr* to Terrans?" the doctor snapped.

The Martian lisped in fright, "For the titanium we get in exchange for it."

I sneered.

The doctor said softly, "You underestimate us, my friend. We happen to have spent years in this investigation and know titanium is used practically not at all in your industries. You have no need for it, at least not at all in the quantities we have to send you in order to supply Terra with *dwarr.*"

I tightened my finger on the trigger and his antenna flinched.

The doctor held up a hand as though to restrain me momentarily. "We also happen to know," he said, "that the use of *dwarr* is unknown on Mars. You know its effect, you know what it has done to us; and *you don't use it yourselves.* Why, *why, why!* do you Martians sell *dwarr* to earth. Are you attempting to weaken us so that you may take over our planet and possibly colonize it with your own race?"

There was a touch of scorn in the melancholy face of the Martian. He lisped, "We have no desire for your humid and heavily gravitized planet. We who trade here can hardly wait to return to our home world."

"Then why do you sell us *dwarr?*" Franz Mect cut in. "Is it because your own civilization is on the downgrade, and you're jealous of our potential growth to new heights?"

There was contempt in the other's lisping answer. "Our thivilization ith on the decline no more than ith yourth." The green hue of his eyes had lessened, a sign that he was losing his fear of us, becoming defiant.

I growled at him. "The decline on Terra is caused by the Martian Poppy. Why do you sell it to us?"

"We thell you *dwarr* to thecure the titanium," he lisped sadly. "It ith the only thing we theme to have in quantity that you of earth dethire."

Franz Mect snorted, "But you don't use titanium to any extent. What do you do with it?"

The little Martian was silent. His antenna pointed forward slightly, a sign he was being stubborn. Obviously, he'd reached the point where he wanted to go no further.

Doctr Garnr sensed that we'd

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touched on the crucial point. "What do you do with the titanium we give you for your *dwarr*?" he said urgently.

AFTER a long moment of silence from the alien trader, I sneered, "You boys better leave again. I'll do a little work on him." I put my hand into my pocket for the penknife. "He cheated me before," I said, licking my lips nervously, "started talking before I even touched him." I pressed the button and the blade flicked out wickedly.

The desperate little Martian's eyes went verdure in color and his antenna sagged in fear. "Thith ith illegal," he lisped rapidly, "don't let him do thith to me."

"Talk," I barked.

The others turned to go. I noted from the side of my eyes that even Franz, who'd known me all my life was staring at me with an edge of uncomfortableness. They hurried for the door as though to be out of the way before I started the actual horror of physical violence.

"Yeth!" the Martian yelped suddenly, "Yeth, I'll tell you!"

Doctr Gardnr turned and said softly, "What do you do with the titanium?"

The Martian drooped. "We thell it to the Venuthians," he lisped sadly.

We stood silent for a long moment in incredulity.

Finally Franz Mect cleared his throat and said, "But what do you get from the Venusians for the titanium?"

The frail Martian straightened to the extent possible within his bonds, into his wistful face came a gleam as though of inspiration brought on by something greater, something more important than any of us.

He lisped proudly, "They thell us *maridee*. *Maridee*, do you hear? Now do you know why no Martian ever uthuth *dwarr?* Now do you know?" His green eyes blazed fanatically. "Who would ever uth *dwarr* wonth he had tathted the playthurths of *MARIDEE!*"

After long minutes, someone said, unbelievingly, "But the Venusians haven't an economy advanced enough to use titanium. What do they do with it?"

The fire had left the little Martian's eyes. He slumped back into his chair again, his face showing puzzlement. "We've often wondered," he lisped sadly.

THE END

Bouncing Conversation!

★ By MAX LONG ★

A NUMBER of small telephone installations use microwave radio to do the job. This works fine in the open spaces because the radio waves travel in straight lines just like light does. But what do you do with such a system when there's a mountain or two in the way?

Nothing daunted, the engineers handle that one, too. Instead of sending the directional radio waves straight toward the objective, they seek out clear paths and put suitable reflectors in the way. In this fashion they bounce the radio waves from one screen to another, right around the intervening mountains, a sort of "Tinkers-to-Evers-to-Chance" proposition.

The use of microwave communication systems holds great promise. It's a lot easier to set up a sending and receiving station than it is to lay wires between two points separated by as much as fifty or seventy-five miles. The time is coming—not immediately of course, but soon—when communications are going to be needed in a very mountainous region—the surface of the Moon! Microwave systems with suitable reflectors are the clear-cut answer!

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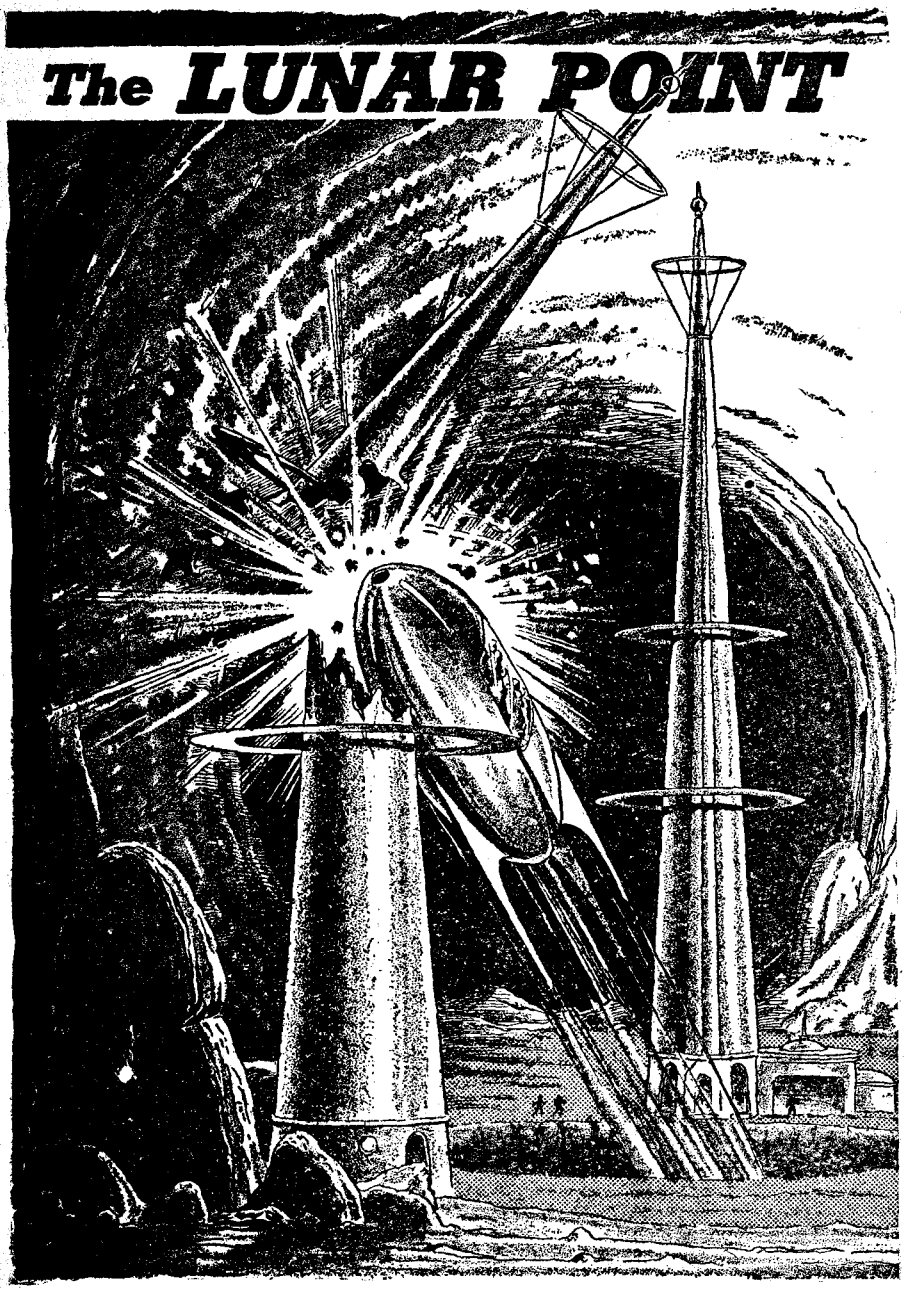
The LUNAR POINT



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# of VIEW

By S. M. Tenneshaw

Earthmen fought for control of the Lunar Mines, while the Moon People waited patiently – waiting to reward the loser! . . .

EARTHLIGHT made the lunar plain a vast pool of brilliance. Beneath the high bright rims of the craters canyons twisted wildly, and lava flows threw highlights of eerie brilliance from their fire polished edges.

Jon Dyke, in his cumbrous space suit, threw the petcock open that let the last tank of oxygen into his suit. Here, in the base of the crater, he must make contact with the Mocs—and soon—his oxygen was getting low.

He paused for an instant, looking down from the rim of the crater at weird shapes below him, rising out of the plain like fantastic dragons out of the sea. It stirred something inside him, yet he was unable to put a word to the emotion. He was able to put few feelings into words. He wondered again, briefly, with the oxygen petcock in his fingers, what had possessed him to undertake a mission for which he was so unsuited.

Standing so, in the eerie earthlight, ghosts seemed to stand beside

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him, whispering in his ears. There was his superior, president of Galactic Spaceways, saying, "You're a fool, Jon! Look at your personality figgures: mental index nine, personality index two. No wonder you are our best research physicist. Leave adventure to the extrovertive indices. Forget this wild idea." There was too a woman's voice, Dawn Shane's voice, saying scornfully, "You're just a machine, with your atoms and ergs. You don't know what the world really is, or what people are like. You never will, as long as you stay in the shell of your mind."

For an instant her face lived before him, deep turquoise eyes blazing into his, red lips below them in a tiny heart shaped face. He wondered again, briefly, what would have happened if he had followed his impulse, and kissed her then.

Of course he hadn't, he was too shy. But her words corroded his mind till he had insisted on undertaking this omission.

For a moment his ears heard the hiss of the oxygen as it filtered into his suit, for a moment he wondered, panicky, if it was enough, if it would last till he made contact with the Mocs.

Then the thought vanished in his fear of meeting the Mocs. Not that he had a physical fear, but the thought of meeting a strange race, of trying to express himself before them, or conversing with them. He groaned— Mental index nine, Personality index two. Almost as much intelligence, far above the norm, and a personality index way up there.

This was the man Jon had to beat. If Galactic Spaceways was to establish the first base on Luna he would have to convince the mutant Mocs, who dominated the satellite, that such outer world communication was desirable. Not only that, but that Galactic Spaceways were the only logical builders of Lunar Spaceport One.

Null Nevins would be doing the same thing for Terran Rocket Lines. Null, with his big, likeable face, and personality index nine.

Jon had to outsell Null Nevins. He thought bitterly, "What a salesman I'll make—Personality index two."

And then he saw the Moc.

It stood in the bottom of the crater, below him, a little hunched forward, on many jointed legs. It was smaller than he was, about the size of a collie dog. It stood looking up at him, waiting for him to descend.

Jon set his lips in a grim, thin line, and hurried down the slope

THE MOCS were reasonably hospitable, Jon found. They fed him, gave him cavern room with a bed of LIXAR skins, and left him to await his summons before the governing council of Mocs. He no longer wore the cumbrous space suit, for there was artificial atmosphere in the cavern passages.

Jon's mind dwelt on the Mocs as he waited. What sort of appeal would be most likely to move the Mocs? Certainly it must be based on logic. Since their discovery a hundred years ago by the explorer Norman Kane, the Mocs had developed traces of emotion. They maintained now a sort of amused tolerance toward earth visitors, where once they attempted destruction through a form of telepathic hypnotism.

Contact with terrans had set the stage for return of emotions to the Mocs, emotions that had been lost in mutations caused by the first violent radioactive rays when the craters of the moon were blown.

The Mocs would be at least partially susceptible to the emotional blandishments of Null Nevins.

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Undoubtedly the first thing they would ask would be what they stood to gain by the opening of a spaceport, and the establishing of regular service of large ships to Venus, Mars, and the outer planets. There were many advantages—it would create larger markets for the uranium mines of the Mocs. Jon began ticking other advantages off on his fingers when a Moc came into the chamber.

His thought flowed into Jon's mind. "The council awaits you."

Jon followed the Moc along a circular passage, smooth as a polished floor. Against the polished smoothness traces of rich mineral ore were to be seen, testimony to the rich mineral crust of Luna.

They came out into a large cavern room, luxuriantly furnished. A wondrously soft, thick plastic textile covered the floor, and at the end of the room a dais stood, smoothly functional in design of modern polished metal. Seven Mocs sat about the dais.

An earth man, too, sat in the group, with an amused smile playing over his big sun-browned face.

Jon felt the chill of space in his veins. He felt as though he were shriveling, and wanted to slip quietly away, back to his laboratory. The man was Null Nevins.

The old inferiority sense was upon Jon, and he bowed before the chief Moc on the dais. As in a dream he heard his voice stating Galactic's desire to establish a spaceport on Luna. He was amazed that he had been able to state it so clearly. In a moment he knew his knees would be trembling, and his voice would begin to stutter.

His confidence was evaporating under the amusement of Nevin's expression. He tensed himself, trying to remember the various advantages to the Mocs that he had memorized. He could not even remember how he was to begin. He felt his knees turning to jelly, and Nevin's face swam in his blurred vision.

The thought of the Moc ruler, Go-Vani, murmured surprisingly in his mind, "Why, Terran, do you not build these ports on Terra? Why do you desire to build them here instead?"

THIS WAS a matter of physics, of mathematics. Jon was conscious of a sense of reprieve, and as his voice answered automatically his subconscious mind wrestled with the forgotten arguments.

"It is a matter of escape velocities. In order to escape from the gravitational pull of Terra it is necessary to build a velocity of seven miles per second, or in your terms, twenty glurs per ulm. This requires a vast quantity of fuel, to be consumed before the ship is even free of Terra. This becomes increasingly important as we increase the size of our ships, due to the exponential nature of the reactions involved.

"If we could start the run to the outer planets from Luna, this escape velocity reduces to one and four tenths miles per second. The saving in cargo space, and in fuel will be tremendous. It is unnecessary to ferry fuel from Terra to equip such Lunar ships, for fuel can by synthesized here from your uranic stock piles.

"This plan then, would be to ship passengers and cargo to Luna in small rockets, and transship into the huge Lunar space liners. The engineering advantages of such a plan are obvious."

Jon saw the Mocs looking at him, without expression as they pondered this information. They seemed alien unfriendly beings. Jon looked from one to another for some reassurance

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of good will. They might as well have been bronze, for all he could discern.

"Have you other reasons for urging this project?" Go-Vani's thought murmured.

Now was the time, but Jon's carefully studied arguments were gone, lost somehow in the alien atmosphere of this room. He wanted to get away, before the rubbery quivering of his legs became entirely apparent. He stood, unable to speak, throat muscles knotted and dry.

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "Very well. The other Terran, Mr. Nevins, mentioned other arguments. He told us how our race would prosper and advance through this development. He also stated a number of reasons why only one Terran firm should be given license to operate such a port. We will consider both your arguments."

Nodding numbly, Jon permitted himself to be led from the room. The last thing he saw as he departed was the contemptuous face of Null Nevins. All the way to the cavern quarters the bitter taste of failure was in his mouth. Atoms were his field, and ergs, and quanta, but living beings were too much for him.

He lay on the bed in his quarters for a long time, gazing unseeingly at the wall.

THERE WAS a time of sleep and rest and food, and then a visit from the Moc he had met. The Moc's message flowed into Jon's mind. "I am Do-Lasto. I bring an invitation to visit the uranium mines, and discuss further the matter of the spaceports."

Do-Lasto led him outside the chamber to one of the smooth circular communication tunnels. On the tunnel was a car. Do-Lasto opened a port in the vehicle and motioned Jon to enter.

There were already two other persons in the car; Go-Vani, leader of the Mocs, and Null Nevins.

Go-Vani's thought murmured an emotionless greeting, and Null Nevins thrust out a huge brown paw, saying cheerfully, "Morning, Dyke. How goes it?"

Jon took the proffered hand, feeling the vibrant force of the big man's personality. The heartiness, the very timbre of his voice made one like and trust him instantly, and Jon had to force himself to remember things he had heard of Null's lack of scruples. He sensed, too, that Go-Vani was under something of the spell of Null's personality, though certainly his emotional responses were much fainter than that of Terran men.

Null rumbled heartily. "Guess I might as well bring you up to date, Jon. I think Go-Vani is pretty well persuaded to build the spaceport, though he will only want to do business with one firm. We will want to locate the port near the uranium mines, to make the synthesis and supply of rocket fuel most convenient. Then, too, any ore shipments for the Mocs, can be more conveniently loaded. They're gonna take us through the mines."

Jon nodded, understandingly. Null must have progressed greatly to be so friendly, so sure of himself.

The car was flowing with smooth rapidity through the polished tunnel. Here and there vents showed in the tunnel walls, vents through which were introduced the atmosphere they breathed.

The car stopped in a vast cavern. As they dismounted Jon could see the glowing atomic lights above the high cavern room that made it seem as daylight. In the distant reaches of the cavern, twin towers loomed, their frail slenderness reaching high to the arched roof of the huge, un-

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der, lunar ores.

"The towers mark the entrance to the mines," Do-Lasto told them.

AS THEY approached they could see that the towers performed a useful function, for at their tops were power plants, and thin cables stretched down from these. The cables were moving, and a cylindrical bucket, incredibly large, appeared at the base of the towers, drawn out of the ground by the cables. It was carried up a considerable distance, and dumped into a vast hopper, and then the bucket descended slowly after more ore.

How primitive, Jon thought.

He heard Null's voice saying to Go-Vani, "The ore lifts are slow and cumbrous. We have not used such lifts on Terra for years."

"We have been considering modernization," Go-Vani assured him. "Perhaps you can assist us with this task."

Why, Jon wondered, must I always be so slow. Why did I hesitate, while someone else came forth with an idea and got credit for it. He set his lips grimly. If it was engineering advice they wanted, he should be able to outclass Null.

They descended the shaft.

"It should be simple to mount a rocket motor on the bottom of that cylinder. That would give you faster results, and eliminate the need for the towers," Null said.

"It is not so simple, or it should have been done long ago. The blast of the rocket reacts on the ore in these walls. The resulting radioactivity causes severe burns on the workers. From the base of the cylinders I can better explain this," Go-Vani stated.

They took a small elevator shaft, dropping perhaps a mile before they were on a level with the bottom of the ore lift shaft.

This elevator is little used," Go-Vani continued his explanation. "It leads to an abandoned shaft. All along this shaft the ore has been too thin to be profitable."

They dismounted from the elevator into a smoothly polished, horizontal tunnel. Along this abandoned tunnel they walked a few hundred yards, and came to a landing. Resting on the landing was the huge cylindrical ore carrier. Beneath the landing another cylindrical tunnel led away, and through this tunnel were coming cars of ore, to be elevated and dumped into the great ore carrier.

"That is our present work tunnel," Go-Vani explained. "As I told you the radioactivity developed here by the reaction of the rocket blast, and the heat, make the loading dangerous and impractical. Of course we could re-design the shafts, but this would require much major work, and we have hesitated to undertake it."

"It should be possible to line the vertical shaft with some alloy," Null said.

"Yes, but that too is a major task, since the alloy would have to be of a nature to resist the rocket blast over a period of years."

Jon's mind was racing. If only he could express this idea of his. He opened his mouth, and felt his throat tightening, knotting. There was, he decided, one way to keep from making a fool of himself. He took a notebook from his pocket, and began to draw diagrams, and set up equations.

They walked through the mine. He was lost in his calculations, grunting when he was spoken to, ignoring the fact that Null was asking questions, intelligent questions that showed his interest.

As they came to the surface he finished, and saw Go-Vani looking at him oddly. He wondered then, in

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a moment of panic, if he had lost this encounter with Null Nevins, in spite of the drawings and equations he held in his hand. He extended the notes to Go-Vani.

"I think this will solve your problem," he said.

Go-Vani glanced at the drawings casually, then with mounting interest. He pondered the equations, and the faint edge of surprise showed in his voice.

"Would you consider supervising such an installation?" Go-Vani asked.

"Of course."

"The council will meet and consider these. We will send for you soon. If you can build a working lift along these lines you will not go unrewarded."

The glow of successful accomplishment was warming Jon's mind. He knew his plan was good. This should be the move that put him ahead of Nevins. He looked up, expecting to see rueful admiration on Null's face.

He saw instead, that Null was laughing at him.

"He doesn't mean what you think, Dyke," Null rumbled amusedly. "The trouble with you is you don't understand these Mocs."

JON DID not know why Null's remark should trouble him so. He had been treated with great respect and honor since the drawings and equations had gone before the council, yet the laughter of Null Nevins lived in his mind, making him unsure of himself. The reactions of living beings were something that never could be expressed by a formula, and the feeling persisted that Null had begun to realize something that Jon had missed.

Do-Lasto came now to Jon's chambers, his thoughts saying, "The council has considered your plan, and would speak to you."

It was easier standing before the council now, for Jon had the feeling that he was respected. Yet he knew the frightened voicelessness would seize him again, if much explanation was necessary.

"The idea seems entirely clear and physically sound," Go-Vani said. "It requires no explanation. I have only to ask you to supervise its installation."

"Certainly," Jon agreed.

"A most ingenuous idea. What suggested it to you?"

"On Terra plants grow that have small, round seeds. We call them peas. For as long as history is recorded children have been putting these in hollow tubes, and blowing them at some target. When I saw the cylindrical ore car in the polished shaft I thought of a child's pea shooter," Jon explained.

"I see. And the shaft, the unused shaft, that was convenient to generate the gas pressure away from out workers, the gas to shoot the car up the shaft, like a pea from a child's tube."

"Yes," Jon agreed. "It is a simple problem in hydraulics."

"Simple enough, yet we had not thought of it." Go-Vani agreed.

"If this lift is successful will you contract with Galactic Spaceways for the building of the first Lunar spaceport?"

Go-Vani shook his head. "I did not mean that at all."

"You said I would not go unrewarded," Jon stated.

"Of course not. We will pay you the very top technician's wages for your supervision. As to the spaceport, we will do what we think best."

Now Jon knew why Null had laughed. Gratitude, as Terrans conceived it, was an unknown emotion here. If Jon succeeded in the task

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of the new compression lift his only reward would be wages. But if he failed—. With a sick horror he wondered if the Mocs could be unemotional toward failure. Perhaps, yet he had the feeling that if he failed his mission was lost entirely. He had everything to loose, and nothing to gain. To this bleak discouragement there was an additional irritation; the laughing face of Null Nevins would not leave Jon's memory.

THERE followed a solid week of work, of laboring in the tunnel with hordes of Mocs under his supervision. There was work that consumed his mind, and his energy, so that he fell on the Lixar skins of his bed without thought of other things, and fell into the black sleep of sheer exhaustion.

The delicate construction of locks had to be accomplished, to seal the working shaft away from the lift tube, when the gas propelled the cylinder. This lock had to be simple, and absolutely fool proof. Yet at length they had locks in the two tunnels.

The reaction that developed the gas, to create vast quantities of heated atmosphere to pop the great loaded ore car up a mile high vertical shaft, such a reaction had to be a chain atomic reaction, to develop enough power. But then that meant sure controls had to be established, for it would not do to throw the ore load out the top of the tube and high into the sky, like the cork from a champagne bottle. So that, too had to be controlled.

Even from this comparatively innocent atomic reaction Jon had chosen, there were traces of radio activity. True, the reaction was far down the abandoned shaft, far from any work area, but still, in safety's sake, it was best to try to trap the radio-active particles, to trap them with huge screen grids, stretched across the generating tunnel.

Reports of Null Nevins reached him occasionally. Null was lunching with Go-Vani. Null had gone on a tour of the Capital City. Null and Go-Vani were seen at a place of entertainment, and that in itself was significant, for to Mocs the desire for entertainment was small.

Yet, Jon had set himself a task, and there was no time to worry about these other things till his task was finished.

At last he was satisfied.

When Go-Vani and his council came to make the preliminary inspection of the work they were accompanied by Null Nevins. At the generating chamber Null looked at Jon and said witheringly, "That is a poor reaction— Too unstable."

In answer to the question growing in Go-Vani's eyes, Jon said fiercely, "There are two isotopes suitable for this reaction. One is violently unstable. The other is very safe and lends itself to control. I am using the safer isotope."

Null shook his shaggy head. He said to Go-Vani, "Well, don't be surprised if your ear comes bursting out the top, like a cork out of a bottle. When that happens, you might as well sign with Terran Rocket lines, and settle everything."

Go-Vani did not respond, but Jon saw a thoughtful look in his eyes.

"It appears in order. We will test it tomorrow," Go-Vani said.

IN SPITE of his weariness, Jon did not sleep well that night. Here, in this Lunar room where it was never night or day, the hands of his watch told him it was an hour past Terran midnight. He had the feeling that something was wrong at the ore lift.

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The feeling grew so strong that he dressed. He would go to the tunnel and see that everything was all right. He left word that he would meet the Council at the tunnel on the morrow, instead of at the chamber as planned.

Everything appeared to be in order at the lift. The reactants were all in the tunnel. The remote controls, so that the reaction could be controlled from outside, were in order. Yet small things bothered him. He had the feeling that things were somehow not quite the same, that something had been touched, or moved.

He sat, watching, unsleeping, till the Council arrived many hours later. Then he checked his preparations. Everything appeared in order.

"You may load the first load," Jon ordered.

The steady stream of little cars flowed, dumping ton after clattering ton of ore into the huge cylindrical carrier. When it was done, Jon said softly, "This is it," and threw the switch, planning to expel the lift very slowly this first time.

Yet something was wrong, the indicators indicated that the cylindrical bullet was riding too fast, much too fast. He threw the lever to stop the reaction and saw Null Nevins looking at him, triumph in his eyes.

The pressure on his gauges continued to rise. It should fall now that the reaction had been switched off, and the cylinder moved up the tube. Pressure was building instead and the cylinder was sliding incredibly fast.

It was out of control. From where they stood, they saw the ore carrier fly high out of the tube, with a pop that almost deafened them. It turned once on the way up, spilling ore in a vast cascading rumble, then swung horizontally, falling athwart one of the towers in its downward path.

The tower buckled and inclined, breaking the fall of the cylinder, so that it fell empty, with little damage, and lay with the ruined tower hovering over it, like a mother bending over a fallen child.

It was impossible. Yet the memory of Null's leering face leaped into his mind and with a mounting rage Jon knew what had happened.

He whirled on Null, "I know why things looked different in the generating chamber. You had been there substituting the dangerous isotope for the safe one. I can prove that by analyzing the blast gases."

Nevins' grin destroyed the last vestige of Jon's control.

"I won't wait for the analysis," he flared. He lashed at Nevins in a burst of atavistic savagery, felling him with the blow and swarmed on the fallen body, drawing Nevins' arm into a bone cracking hold.

Nevins rumbled, "Don't break that arm. I'll admit it. Of course I made the substitution. Your lift would have worked otherwise."

JON RELEASED him and Null rose to his feet, smiling, unabashed. He said softly, "I still say you don't understand these people."

Jon whirled to Go-Vani. "You heard his confession!"

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "A most surprising fellow."

Jon realized he was gaping. "*A most surprising fellow*" That meant Go-Vani did not blame Null. That he thought it a legitimate part of the competition. As the anger rose again, red and uncontrollable, he knew that he was not being entirely fair to Go-Vani. It was simply the lack of emotion the Mocs had. Their response was to logic, to fact. The fact was indisputable. The lift had failed. All his forgotten arguments flared into

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his mind. By PLUTO! He'd give them logic.

His voice was a cold driving wind, the voice of a stranger, marshalling facts and argument. When he had finished he said, "There, sign with whom you choose, I have been too long among you."

Go-Vani's thought murmured, "An eloquent argument!"

Yet Jon was barely conscious of his words. He was lost in the discovery he had made about himself. He had forgotten to be shy. In moments of great importance, this was the solution, to feel strongly, and forget to be shy.

He knew, too, with a certain knowledge, that back on Terra, Dawn Shane had wanted to be kissed, and he knew how to let emotion conquer shyness when they were together again.

The thought of Go-Vani burst blackly into the dream, "It is perhaps unfortunate that such an effective argument should be wasted. The truth is we decided between you the first day you arrived. We delayed announcing it, because we wished to study you, to learn more of your odd reactions. We will deal with many Terran men when the port opens."

Slowly, sickly, Jon lifted his eyes to Null's. There was a half smile of triumph on Nevins' lips. The thought of Go-Vani continued.

"You may go now, Null Nevins. We sign with Jon Dyke."

Jon knew his own face must mirror Null's amazement. Null whirled, and left them then.

Go-Vani was watching Jon. "Why are you so surprised, Terran? We had to judge your firms by the representatives they sent. Our opinion was unanimous after that first meeting. Nevins spoke of advancement, glory, greatness. You spoke of escape velocities, and calories, and fuel weights."

For an instant it was as though Go-Vani had sighed, as though some faint trace of regret tinged his thought.

"Mr. Nevins was charming. He was such an infinitely pleasing fellow. What a pity that he was not a practical man."

THE TALKING MACHINE

★ **By Leslie Phelps** ★

THERE HAS been a singular dearth of gadgets for imitating the human voice. In fact we can only recall one, the famed "Voder" that was exhibited at the New York World's Fair and which was installed in a robot. It did a crude imitation of the human voice that left much to be desired even though it was the most advanced attempt even up to now.

The way the human vocal system works is this: we move our lips and tongue in such a way as to divide our vocal tract into boxes or cavities, one the mouth, the other the throat. Then our vocal chords make sounds, soft sounds, which are resonated or bounced back and forth until they're strong enough to come out loud and clear.

A scientist at the Bell Telephone Labs finally hit on the idea that the nearest thing to these cavities which we call throats and mouths, would be some sorts or cylinders. He'd tried out the idea—and it works.

The new machine will make all the vowel sounds that a human throat and mouth will and it'll do the job reasonably well. Of course it will be improved upon now that the basic principles of sound construction are understood.

Right now there isn't any use for such a machine. But there will be. The cybernetics (guys who play around with machines to duplicate human functions) are going to be ready eventually to harness the nervous systems of people who are dumb, to just such a mechanical voice box-system.

The tools are at hand. Perhaps the device will find use in one of the devices scientists are trying to make, a clever, complicated mechanism which will read aloud to the blind!

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ONE LEG IS ENOUGH

The planets wanted men, and Al Lyons wanted those planets. But how could he be of any use up there as only half a man?

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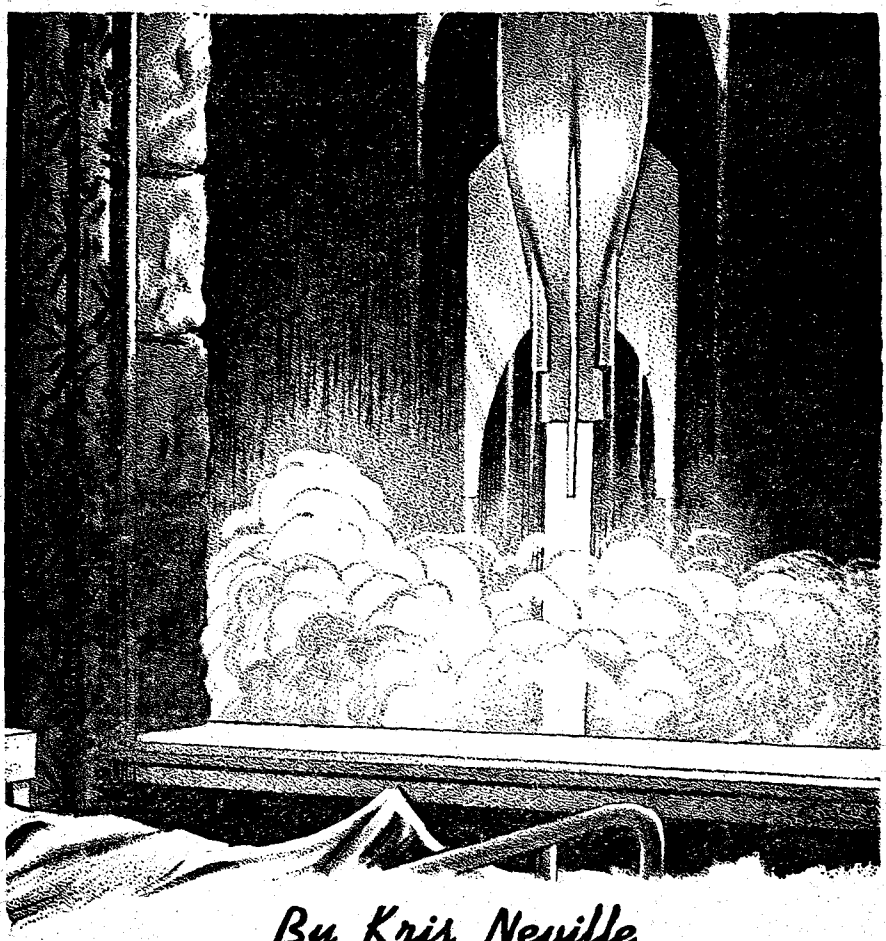

By Kris Neville

A FIRE-FLASH from Richardson Field illuminated his room. After a moment he heard the hissing roar of the rocket as it hurtled skyward.

That was the fifth one this month.

He lay between the crisp, cool sheets and stared out through the window. They're probably shooting for Venus again, he thought.

He felt his self-imposed isolation acutely. At night it was the worst; that was why he had demanded that they take the television set out of his room: for fear that, in a moment of midnight weakness, he would turn it on to try to find out what was happening. During the day, it was easier; whenever Doctor or Nurse tried to volunteer information, he could cut them short with a half animal snarl. But at night, when he was alone....

One of the most important things in the world was that he go on *not*

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caring; that gave him a solid rock to cling to. He repeated over and over to himself, "I don't care what they're doing."

But the fifth already this month!

No. He didn't give a damn about it; he was too proud to give a damn; he would lay here and die without giving a damn.

Every night he promised himself that he would ask Nurse to transfer him to the other wing, first thing in the morning, where he wouldn't even be able to *see* the rocket fire. But every morning he always found a reason to postpone the request for one more day. Deep inside he knew that he did not want to transfer rooms. Each fire-flash sent him wallowing in a wave of self-pity, and it was like a drug.

Nurse had said something about that the other day.

He could remember her words quite clearly, just as she had spoken them. Of late, he had discovered that his memory was very good.

"You don't want to get well, Al," she had said. "You lay here and feel sorry for yourself, and you don't want to get well. That's your trouble."

Well, he told himself, suppose I don't want to get well. If I don't want to get well, that's my own business.

He turned his face into the pillow.

Not to me, he shrieked mentally. Not to *me*! Such things are bound to happen when men and machinery mix; but always to the other guy. Not to me.

For six months he had lain between the white sheets of the hospital bed, studying the ceiling during the day and tossing restlessly at night, waiting with a wild mixture of emotions, bitterness, hatred, jealousy, pity, contempt, for a rocket flash to light his room and announce that another ship had headed outward.

And more and more as he lay there, he found escape from the oppression of his room in memory....

"HOW'S THE patient today?" Doctor asked.

"Still alive, I guess."

Doctor made professional motions with his hands. "Sleep well last night?"

"So-so."

"Noticed the leg lately?"

(Remembering that question, Al winced. The leg wasn't there anymore, but for the first month after they had amputated, he had been kept awake most of the time because he could feel a cramp in it.)

"No," he said sullenly.

Quit thinking about it, he told himself. Think of something pleasant....

HE CAME out of Hanger 5 and started toward the Rec hall.

"Hey, Al!"

"Yeah?"

"Old Man wants to see you."

"What's he want?"

"Didn't say."

"Well, thanks.... Thanks, Jerry. Guess I better go see."

Al heard his feet clip-clop hollowly. It was nice to walk, to feel the free and easy sway as the legs moved like pistons.

"Al Lyons," he told the Space corporal at the reception desk.

"Lyons, eh?" The corporal eyed him. "Go on in."

The Old Man was a Space Service captain. He was a big, friendly man who realized that the civilian maintenance crews really *were* civilians. The men in 314 all swore by him.

"Oh? Come in, young fellow."

"I'm Al Lyons, sir. You wanted to see me?"

"Yes. Indeed I did. Glad you could come right over. Take a chair."

Al sat down.

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"I believe you submitted an application last year for Space School."

"Yes, yes, sir," Al gulped.

The Old Man smiled. "Well, I got the report on it this morning."

Al Lyons could feel the sweat break out on the palms of his hands. "Yes, sir?"

The Old Man stood up and came around the desk. He extended his hand.

"Let me be the first to congratulate you."

"You mean....you mean....I made it?" There was disbelief in his voice.

The Old Man was pumping his hand. "First quintile. Leave Richardson Field Monday for Seaton."

Al Lyons tried to think of something to say. He told himself that he was a grown man, now. "Well, I'll be damned," he said.

But that was what he was trying to forget; everything connected with the Space Service. He tossed restlessly in his bed.

His mind, too, refused to be still....

WHEN HE stepped off the night train (which had made a special stop) at the railroad siding and passenger depot, the air of the desert almost took his breath away. The stars, overhead, were pin pricks of brilliance set against an inconceivably vast loneliness.

He could see, by sallow moonglow, the double spur lines stretch away across the desert to Richardson Field, New Mexico. No cars stood now on the lines. It was the weekend. The depot itself, an Army unit, was lifeless.

He had wired, according to instructions, and he had expected someone to meet him. Now, being away from home for the first time, he felt small and isolated.

For five or ten minutes he walked around the depot. After that, he sat down on the rough boards of the cargo platform to wait.

He swung his legs.

After half an hour alone with the stars and the flat, white sands, he saw the lights of a car creeping toward him along a darker ribbon that was the asphalt road. The twin headlights grew larger and larger until finally the car, a new jeep, rattled up to the depot.

The driver cut the engine.

"You the man for 314?"

"Yes. Yes, sir," Al Lyons called.

"Grab your gear, kid, and let's go."

Al Lyons picked up his two suitcases and walked over to the jeep.

"Toss 'em in back."

He did and then climbed into the car.

The driver started the engine, shifted, sent the jeep leaping backwards, spun it around in a tight circle, and headed toward the distant lights.

After a while, the driver said, "Been waiting long?"

"Not very."

"Sorry. These don't go as fast as I thought. Should have been here twenty minutes ago."

"That's okay."

There was silence again. Then:

"What's your name, kid?"

"Al Lyons."

"Al, eh? Where from?"

"Ohio."

The driver grunted.

"What's your name?" Al Lyons asked.

"Willie. Willie Cord."

Al Lyons nodded. "What do you do out here, Willie?"

"Pilot."

"Jets?"

"Space."

"Space?" Al Lyons gasped. "You mean a *space* pilot came all the way over here just to pick me up?"

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WILLIE CORD studied the road ahead. "Might as well. We're blasting in another couple of hours. Didn't have anything else to do to kill time."

Al Lyons said, "Oh." He, too, studied the road.

"Been in long?"

"Eight years at it—almost from the first."

"Then you must have known Richardson?"

"....Yeah. Used to get drunk with him.... Crazy guy.... Wild...."

Al Lyons decided that wasn't any way to talk about a hero.

"Told him, Rick, quit. Quit while you're winning. You got to the Rock. Let someone else try Venus."

Willie Cord clamped his jaw.

"Nope. Said he was lucky." Willie Cord smiled grimly. "He was wrong."

"What do you think—happened?"

Willie Cord shrugged. "Cracked up landing. Any of a million things. Can't tell...."

Al Lyons kept silent for a mile. Then he asked:

"What do you think of Seaton?"

Willie Cord considered this. "A grind....

"You go four years. Okay. You get out. An engineer. If you're lucky, a pilot's job, like mine. Otherwise: Lug you up to Mars....or the Rock. You dig ditches, or set on your fanny, or map terrain. Or look for uranium. All comes to the same thing....

"I hauled up the first graduates last years. Eager kids, all excited. Dumped 'em on Mars. What the hell. Nothing to do. All there is is Marsport: a dome a quarter mile across: fifty men. A year at a stretch. Living like dogs. Sit around, play cards, cuss, talk about dames."

"But to be on *Mars*," Al Lyons protested. "That must be something. Exciting, just to be there."

"Better than the Rock, maybe, but exciting, no.... On the Rock you really work. Putting up the damn rocket base for the Army or the damn telescope for the astronomers. Army don't need the base and the astronomers don't need the 'scope. But you bust a gut for them, just the same... On Mars, better, in a way. Don't do nothing but set, most of the time. Exciting, hell no. To be on Mars....kid dreams....as the Congress will tell you: they cut our appropriations one more time, and *we* won't be there."

"But someday there'll be a giant dome, miles and miles across, and people can live under it almost as comfortably as they live here...."

"Not in our times, kid. No reason. Costs too much."

Al Lyons looked away from the road, up at the stars.

"You're wrong, Willie."

"No, kid. I'm right." He mused for a moment. "Take last trip. What did I bring back? Samples. That's all: five hundred pounds of rock. And not even a damn smell of pitchblende. Ain't no uranium on the whole damn planet. If there were, the Space Service couldn't squeeze out the money to mine it. We'd just keep it out there for a rainy day with a big 'hands off' sign on it. Hell, the boys have quit lookin'...."

Al Lyons shook his head vigorously. "It *can't* be like that. There's something out there. I don't know what. Maybe not adventure or excitement, but something like that. It's like the sea is, to some people. You may cuss her and cuss her, but you keep going back, if only just for the sake of going."

Willie Cord smiled. "I know, kid."

AL LYONS stared at the ceiling. A man with one leg can't get into the Space Service. *A man with one leg can't ever get into the Space Service.*

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And those things rolling down his cheeks weren't tears; weren't really tears. He was twenty-one, and people twenty-one don't cry.

Maybe it wasn't the thing itself; maybe it was just wanting it so bad.

When he was eleven years old, Richardson made the first trip to the Rock. But even before that, he had dreamed about going to space. When he was a little child. First he had wanted to be an explorer; go to Africa or some distant place. Later, as soon as he could really understand, the longing had transferred from Africa to the Moon, and after that, to the planets themselves, as they came within the horizon of possibility.

He had taken a job in civilian maintenance at Richardson Field as soon as he had graduated from high school, just so he could be near the rockets. He had studied hard, after working hours, denying himself many of the pleasures of youth, and last year he had taken the Seaton tests—

He had been seventeen when Richardson tried for Venus; eighteen when Comsky first landed on Mars....

Max Comsky had been born and raised in his home town. Once, Al Lyons had actually met him. At the time, Al had been sixteen.

MAX COMSKY was a big man; sharp, bold eyes.

"The Rock, kid? Wonderful life.... Wonderful. Work, sure. But excitement, too."

Al Lyons listened open-mouthed.

"Never know what's gonna happen. Last month, ship before mine, Old Nancy they called her, busted her shielding half way in. Crew landed her, believe it or not. Half dead, all six of them, but they set her down; pretty a job as you ever hope to see, too. Every man on board radio-active, but they got her down... Silly... Anything happen to me like that, and I'd turn the ship sunward and let her rip, hell for breakfast..."

(Max Comsky's last ship never returned, Al Lyons remembered: Lost out of Mars.)

Max was the type who loved to tell his stories of adventure in a big, booming voice, a voice you could hear all over the room. He took an animal delight in it. But, Al Lyons suspected, he was not averse to lowering his voice, on moonlight nights, in female company, to speak softly of the stars and of the strange longing....

"There was once," Max had told him, "when I went into the jet room. Operator was space sick. Out like a light. Mass needle almost to the red. Couple more minutes and we'd have gone with a bang. I slammed in the dampening rods. That threw off the pilot, who had been counting on more power. Lost our cut back drive and we slipped 'way inside Earth, on our way to Venus sure as God made little green apples. I had to run the room for an hour and a half. Rough! Pilot would yell through the intercom, 'Give me nine point lateral,' and I'd yell back, 'How?' and then he'd have to explain it all to me. Didn't know anything about the damn jets room....

"That's why they're starting Seaton: so they can get somebody on those rockets who can blast with a little better than their luck and a prayer."

He had told wonderful and exciting tales, for a boy of sixteen to listen to.

"On the Rock. Out looking. Curious.... No air. You feel like you can jump a thousand feet, and the stars look like little, steady-burning electric bulbs.... It was quiet, and kinda lonely. I was on the rim of Crater 9 about a mile from the dome. All at once, I had a hell of a time

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breathing. Suit was leaking.... I switched on the emergency tank of air, and I started to run, and I mean *really* run. Everytime I'd jump, I'd *float* down, and that seemed to take an eternity.... Scared? Boy! I thought sure if I ever got out of that one I'd had enough...."

AL LYONS thought about running across the surface of the Moon. Just to think of it hurt so badly that he wanted to be sick at his stomach.

"God damn," he said.

Saying that didn't help very much....

Morning began to break.

He wondered if he could get some sleep. His mind began to fuzz up with fatigue....

The way it had happened. That was so unfair.

His last day of work, just before the weekend. Monday he would have gone to Seaton....

"HEY, AL, hand me that lug wrench, willya?"

Al Lyons reached out for it.

"My God! Look out!"

He tried to twist out of the way. Then he could feel the weight crash down on his leg. He could hear the excited babble of voices....

"GOD DAMN, God damn," he said to himself. "I've got to get some sleep."

Sunrise.

He slept.

At eight, Nurse came.

At ten, Doctor came.

At ten twenty-five—

"Al, there's a visitor to see you."

"Don't want to see him."

"He's coming in, Al."

Al Lyons turned over in the bed. He faced the wall. After a while he heard the voice.

"Hi, kid."

"Go 'way," he choked.

"Nope."

He heard Willie Cord draw up the chair. It squeaked under his weight.

"How's it going, kid?"

No answer.

"Just got in from Mars. Somebody told me about a kid over here. Said name of Al Lyons. I remembered: kid I lugged out here in a jeep. Come over to see if I could do something."

"Please let me alone."

"Said the kid wouldn't get well, down at the desk. Because he didn't *want* to get well."

"So what?"

"Damn childish."

"I don't care."

Willie Cord hesitated a moment.

"Thought you might like to hear something."

"No."

"Fine," Willie Cord grunted. "You're going to hear it sooner or later. Might as well hear it now. I pulled some wires for you, kid."

For a moment, Al Lyons felt his heart pound—but then, sick realization came to him. No amount of wire pulling could get a man with an artificial leg in Space Service.

"Remember I told you how there wasn't nothing on Mars? No reason to go there?

"Well, I was wrong."

Willie Cord stopped to let that soak in.

"Remember I told you about hauling back some rock?"

Al Lyons was holding his breath now.

"Well, damn stuff was gold ore.... Rush is on....

"Friend of mine formed a company. Bert Drexal. You may have heard of him."

Al Lyons had. If Bert Drexal was in on it, it was big time.

"Mars Mines, Inc. They're putting

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up a big dome. Plenty big. And it'll get bigger. Civilian stuff, kid. And in a year, maybe two—three years at the most—they'll be needin' clerks hydroponics men, all sorts of men: civilians. One-legged ones, even, if they're willin' to work. Bert said you'd get a job, sure as hell, if you can qualify, and if you're outta that bed. First opening they can use you."

Al Lyons was afraid to turn over; afraid Willie would see how bright his eyes were glistening.

"Gosh—" he said.

"Sound okay to you, kid?"

"Yes. . . .

"Yes," he answered. "I think I'd like something like that."

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 85

sooner I get off this accursed and decadent planet the happier I'll be.

Young lady, you have quite a young man there. I'll tell you all about him when we get to the ship."

"Hold it!" Leslie said.

"What is it?"

Leslie told him of the man called Joseph Strauss. "He said there were thousands of these creatures on Mercury, and that he was going to find them."

Professor Eaton shook his head slowly. "No, that was the last one. The rulers of Mercury destroyed themselves until only this one was left. It lay dreaming in a stupor for thousands of years until some memory of past greatness awakened it. It started on this ambitious and fantastic plan of repopulating Mercury with slaves from other planets. It was an infinitely refined intellect, with tremendous power and perception. But all its thinking ran to destruction."

"What of Joseph Strauss?"

"We can't look for him," the professor said. "Perhaps he will be happy searching the empty domes of Mercury for another god to worship. And perhaps not. It couldn't matter less."

Within a mile they came to a door that led them outside into the murky gray atmosphere of Mercury. Ahead of them was a giant silver square, its metal walls softly refracting the feeble light of the sun.

"There are only six of us left," Professor Eaton said. "There are three others waiting for us in the square. Let's hurry."

Leslie put his arm about Marcia's waist and they began to run over the spongy ground toward the space ship.

THE END

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 103

"Hurry, Jerry," Helen said as she came up.

"I'll run along," Frank said, getting up. "I'm finished already."

"Be seeing you, I hope," Jerry grinned.

He watched Frank go toward the door, his eyes thoughtful.

"Hurry, Jerry," Helen said.

"Call for you, Jerry," the cashier at the front called out.

JERRY TOOK another bite to chew on the way to the phone. Helen tagged along with him.

"This is Major Walters," the voice on the phone announced. "See if you can make it out here to the plant. We won't have time to get the damn thing safely away, and we need your advice on where to hide it so it won't be found. Paratroopers have already landed outside of town, but you might be able to make it."

"O.K.," Jerry said. "I can tell you over the phone. Put it—"

He stopped, an expression of surprise appearing around his eyes.

"Put it where?" Major Walters demanded impatiently.

Jerry hesitated, his eyes going to the stainless-steel wall panel beside the phone that covered storage shelves. Reflected in that panel from the angle at which he stood was the front entrance of the restaurant, and standing there, close enough to overhear what he was saying, was Frank.

"Bury it, Major," he said. "There's no place on the grounds you can bury it, and I should know where it is, in case. So take it directly across the road and bury it at the base of the north end of the big sign there."

In the steel panel he saw Frank slip out the door as he hung up.

"Bury what?" Helen asked.

"Let's get into the air-raid shelter, Helen," Jerry said. "Forget what you heard. It's top secret."

Outside, anti-aircraft searchlights were crisscrossing the sky, revealing the mushroom-like paratrooper chutes that swarmed slowly down, carrying enemy soldiers and equipment.

He took Helen's hand and strolled leisurely along the sidewalk toward the air-raid shelter, whistling an off-key tune. He still felt the tingle of that inspiration that had come to him a brief moment before, of how the ball of light could be used as a weapon to end the war.

"You act as though you were glad the enemy is coming," Helen said, mystified.

"Maybe I am," Jerry said. "I don't think they'll be here long. The war's going to be over very soon."

"What makes you think that, Jerry?" Helen asked.

"Just a hunch."

"IT WAS just a hunch," Jerry said three months later to Major Walters. "I saw Frank standing there where he could hear me. At almost the same time it came to me what that ball of light could do in Russia. I could see some Russian scientist experimenting with it and unwittingly letting it settle inside his head, the long succession of penitent officials until the effects spread right up to the Kremlin." He chuckled, and his bride looked at him proudly, her eyes two bright, shining stars. "Can you imagine the leaders of Communism unable to use their most potent weapon, the Lie, because of a more potent weapon, Conscience?"

"I couldn't have then," Major Walters said.

But he had to raise his voice to be heard above the noise of the people in the street outside the window who were celebrating peace.

THE END

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WHEN THE WORLD WENT BLACK

AN "AMAZING" VIGNETTE

BY SALEM LANE

"DO YOU want more of the soup, John?" Louise asked, her hand poised on the ladle.

"I'll have a little more, dear," he answered. But he wasn't really listening. He was thinking how well the planting had come through. Next year he hoped to put in wheat. Next year...

He glanced around the crude wooden cabin, very near to a log-cabin. He asked himself a thousand times what miracle had caused him to be vacationing with Louise when the bombs fell. That had been four years ago and there were no cities and very few people like themselves, fortunate to survive, fortunate not to have been radiation-exposures. Yet he and Louise were still childless and more and more the fear struck him that somehow they'd been touched by the paralysis which had struck down the world.

"John," Louise broke in on his thoughts, "I've been wondering. Can't we run into the city soon? The radiation must be dying down by now."

"No," he answered patiently as if he'd explained this a hundred times before. "It must have been cobalt," he said, "and I'm sure it's not safe. We'll wait. Jackson thinks the same way." Jackson and his wife were two more fortunates who hadn't been touched.

Louise puttered around the simple wood-burning stove. John's gaze lingered on the useless rifle standing against the wall. It would be nice to go into the city. He'd be able to get cartridges for it then. The bow standing beside it though wasn't a bad substitute at that. He thought proudly of the animals he'd brought down with it. He shuddered slightly when he thought also of the other animal—the mutant.

Suddenly he heard Louise shriek and he looked up. At the window a face was peering in and though he glimpsed it only momentarily he knew exactly what it was. There was a Mutie outside!

He dove for the bow and the wall and the simple quiver of arrows beside it. Besides his knife it was his only weapon. Frightened, Louise clung to his arm. Gently John freed himself and stood waiting in front of the door. Certainly the monster outside would make an effort to enter. He hoped that there was only one.

And of course it happened. The wooden latch lifted. The door swung open slowly and the Thing stood there facing them. It had been human once. Even under the ketoid scar tissue that covered its naked hulk from head to toe, the humaness was recognizable. The radiation sickness had not hurts its metabolism though for it stood a good six feet tall even though it was bent with its characteristic stoop. Its arms hung at its side and from the gash of a mouth, unrecognizable sounds issued.

John fitted the nock of an arrow to the string of the bow, poised to draw and fire. "Go away," he said desperately. "We can't help you." He knew the words meant nothing to the thing in front of them. He felt Louise's trembling beside him. He was torn between pity and disgust. This thing had once been a man like himself. But the radiation had changed it completely and some subtle something in its makeup refused to allow it to die. From starvation it had turned into a cannibalistic ghoul, its mental processes non-existent.

John took hold of himself. "Don't look, Louise," he said dispassionately. "I'm going to kill it."

It was mere coincidence that caused the creature to hurl itself toward them, crouched at the opposite wall. He could not have understood the words. The powerful arms extended, it hurled itself into the room. This was food. That was its one motivating factor.

Even as the creature moved John's arms flashed up and the bowstring came back. The vibratory sound of the released bowstring filled the room momentarily and the creature stopped in its tracks staring stupidly at the crudely feathered shaft buried half its length in its chest. A gurgling sound came from its mouth and it sank to the floor—dead.

"Oh John," Louise whispered in mingled relief and horror at the necessity of the deed. John swallowed. I am an atavar, he thought, defending my mate. The silliness of the thought struck him—but this is nineteen eighty. He threw back his head and laughed—but there was no humor in it. He held Louise tightly in his arms. "This is nineteen eighty," he whispered against her hair, "we must live..."

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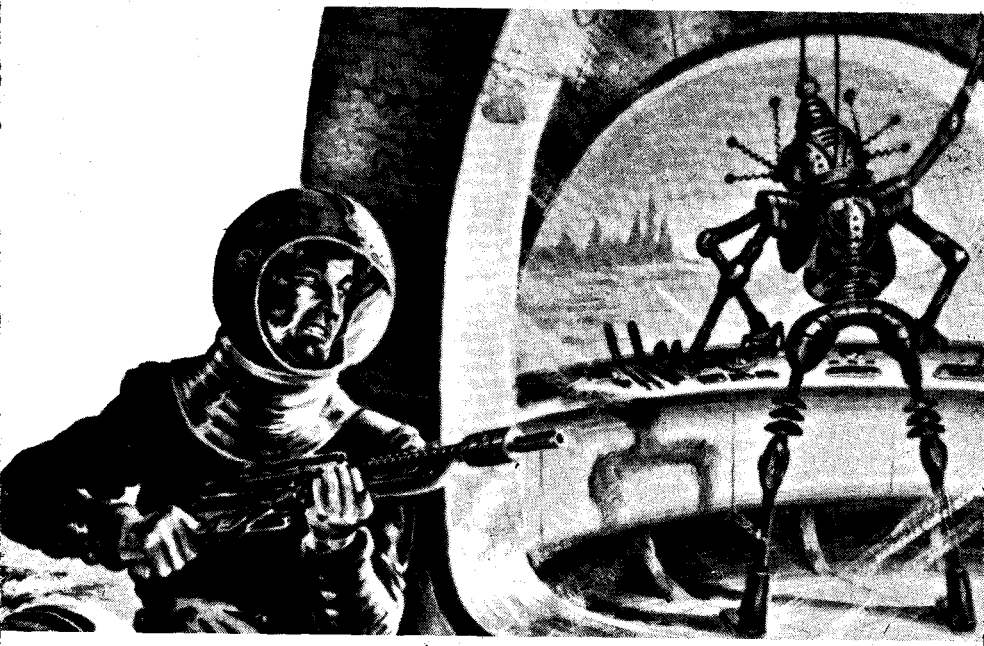

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